

## **CHAPTER TWO: COMPARISON AND CONTRAST**

### **Development of an Essay by Comparison and Contrast**

Every day you exercise the mental process of comparison and contrast. When you get up in the morning, for instance, you may contrast two choices of clothing—a short sleeved shirt versus a long-sleeved one—and then make your decision after hearing the weather forecast. Or you may contrast and choose between Sugar-Coated Plastic Pops and Organic Millet Kernels for breakfast, between the health advantages of walking to campus and the speed afforded by your car or bicycle. Once on campus, preparing to register, you may first compare both professors and courses; similarly, you probably compared the school you attend now to others before you made your choice. In short, you frequently use the process of comparison and contrast to come to a decision or make a judgment about two or more objects, persons, ideas, or feelings.

When you write a comparison or contrast essay, your opinion about the two elements\* in question becomes your thesis statement; the body of the paper then shows why you arrived at that opinion. For example, if your thesis states that Mom's Kum-On-Back Hamburger Haven is preferable to Mc Phony's Mystery Burger Stand, your body paragraphs might contrast the two restaurants in terms of food, service, and atmosphere, revealing the superiority of Mom's on all three counts.

---

\*It is possible to compare or contrast more than two elements. But until you feel confident about the organizational patterns for this kind of essay, you should probably stay with the simpler format.

### **Developing Your Essay**

There are two principal patterns of organization for comparison or contrast essays. For most short papers you should choose one of the patterns and stick with it throughout the essay. Later, if you are assigned a longer essay, you may want to mix the patterns for variety as some professional writers do, but do so only if you can maintain clarity and logical organization.

#### **Pattern One: Point by Point**

This method of organization calls for body paragraphs that compare or contrast the two subjects first on point one, then on point two, then point three, and so on. Study the following example:

**Thesis:** Mom's Hamburger Haven is a better family restaurant than McPhony's because of its superior food, service, and atmosphere.

Point 1: Food  
A. Mom's  
B. McPhony's

Point 2: Service  
A. Mom's  
B. McPhony's

Point 3: Atmosphere  
A. Mom's  
B. McPhony's

Conclusion

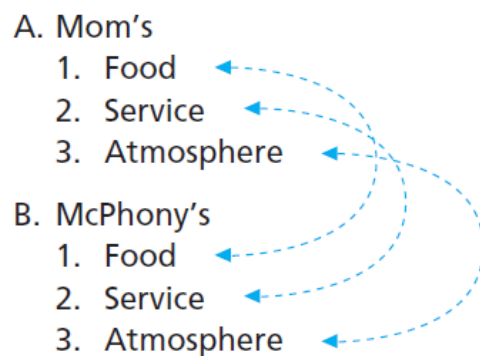
If you select this pattern of organization, you must make a smooth transition from subject "A" to subject "B" in each discussion to avoid a choppy seesaw effect. Be consistent: present the same subject first in each discussion of a major point. In the essay just outlined, for instance, Mom's is always introduced before McPhony's.

### Pattern Two: The Block

This method of organization presents body paragraphs in which the writer first discusses subject "A" on points one, two, three, and so on, and then discusses subject "B" on the same points. The following model illustrates this Block Pattern:

**Thesis:** Mom's Hamburger Haven is a better family restaurant than McPhony's because of its superior food, service, and atmosphere.

A. Mom's  
1. Food  
2. Service  
3. Atmosphere  
B. McPhony's  
1. Food  
2. Service  
3. Atmosphere



Conclusion

If you use the Block Pattern, you should discuss the three points—food, service, atmosphere—in the same order for each subject. In addition, you must include in your discussion of subject “B” specific references to the points you made earlier about subject “A” (see outline). In other words, because your statements about Mom’s superior food may be several pages away by the time your comments on Mc Phony’s food appear, the readers may not remember precisely what you said. Gently, unobtrusively, remind them with a specific reference to the earlier discussion. For instance, you might begin your paragraph on Mc Phony’s service like this: “Unlike the friendly, attentive help at Mom’s, service at Mc Phony’s features grouchy employees who wait on you as if they consider your presence an intrusion on their privacy.” The discussion of atmosphere might begin, “Mc Phony’s atmosphere is as cold, sterile, and plastic as its decor, in contrast to the warm, homey feeling that pervades Mom’s.” Without such connecting phrases, what should be one unified essay will look more like two distinct mini-essays, forcing readers to do your job of comparing or contrasting for themselves.

### **Which Pattern Should You Use?**

As you prepare to compose your first draft, you might ask yourself, “Which pattern of organization should I choose—Point by Point or Block?” Indeed, this is not your simple “paper or plastic” supermarket choice. It’s an important question—to which there is no single, easy answer. For most writers, choosing the appropriate pattern of organization involves thinking time in the prewriting stage, before beginning a draft. Many times, your essay’s subject matter itself will suggest the most effective method of development. The Block Method might be the better choice when a complete, overall picture of each subject is desirable. For example, you might decide that your “then-and-now” essay (your disastrous first day at a new job contrasted with your success at that job today) would be easier for your readers to understand if your description of “then” (your first day) was presented in its entirety, followed by the contrasting discussion of “now” (current success). Later in this section, you will see that Mark Twain chose this method in his essay “Two Ways of Viewing the River” to contrast his early and later impressions of the Mississippi.

On the other hand, your essay topic might best be discussed by presenting a number of distinct points for the reader to consider one by one. Essays that evaluate, that argue the

superiority or advantage of one thing over another (“A cat is a better pet for students than a dog because . . .”), often lend themselves to the Point-by-Point Method because each of the writer’s claims may be clearly supported by the side-by-side details. “Bringing Back the Joy of Market Day,” a student essay in this section, employs this method to emphasize three ways in which a small food cooperative is preferable to a chain grocery store.

However, none of the preceding advice always holds true. There are no hard-and-fast rules governing this rhetorical choice. Each writer must decide which method of organization works best in any particular comparison/contrast essay. Before drafting begins, therefore, writers are wise to sketch out an informal outline or rough plan using one method and then the other to see which is more effective for their topic, their purpose, and their audience. By spending time in the prewriting stage “auditioning” each method of development, you may spare yourself the frustration of writing an entire draft whose organization doesn’t work well for your topic.

### **Problems to Avoid**

**The single most serious error is the “so-what” thesis.** Writers of comparison and contrast essays often wish to convince their readers that something—a restaurant, a movie, a product—is better (or worse) than something else: “Mom’s Haven is a better place to eat than Mc Phony’s.” But not all comparison or contrast essays assert the absolute superiority or inferiority of their subjects. Sometimes writers simply want to point out the similarities or differences in two or more people, places, or objects, and that’s fine, too—*as long as the writer avoids the “so-what” thesis problem.*

Too often, novice writers will present thesis statements such as “My sister and I are very different” or “Having a blended family with two stepbrothers and a stepsister has advantages and disadvantages for me.” To such theses, readers can only respond, “So what? Who cares?” There are many similarities and differences (or advantages and disadvantages) between countless numbers of things—but why should your readers care about those described in your essay? Comparing or contrasting for no apparent reason is a waste of the readers’ valuable time; instead, find a purpose that will draw in your audience. You may indeed wish to write an essay contrasting the pros and cons of your blended

family, but do it in a way that has a universal appeal or application. For instance, you might revise your thesis to say something like “Although a blended family often does experience petty jealousies and juvenile bickering, the benefits of having stepsiblings as live-in friends far outweigh the problems,” and then use your family to show the advantages and disadvantages. In this way, your readers realize they will learn something about the blended family, a common phenomenon today, as well as learning some information about you and your particular family.

Another way to avoid the “so-what” problem is to direct your thesis to a particular audience. For instance, you might say that “Although Stella’s Sweatateria and the Fitness Fanatics Gym are similar in their low student-membership prices and excellent instructors; Stella’s is the place to go for those seeking a variety of exercise classes rather than hard-core bodybuilding machines.” Or your thesis may wish to show a particular relationship between two subjects. Instead of writing “There are many similarities between the movie *Riot of the Killer Snails* and Mary Sheeley’s novel *Salt on the Sidewalk*,” write “The many similarities in character and plot (the monster, the scientist, and vegetable garden scene) clearly suggest that the movie director was greatly influenced by—if not actually guilty of stealing—parts of Mary Sheeley’s novel.”

In other words, tell your readers your point and then use comparison or contrast to support that idea; don’t just compare or contrast items in a vacuum. Ask yourself, “What is the significant point I want my readers to learn or understand from reading this comparison/ contrast essay? Why do they need to know this?”

**Describe your subjects clearly and distinctly.** To comprehend a difference or a similarity between two things, the reader must first be able to “see” them as you do. Consequently, you should use as many vivid examples and details as possible to describe both your subjects. Beware a tendency to over elaborate on one subject and then grossly skimp on the other, an especially easy trap to fall into in an essay that asserts “X” is preferable to “Y.” By giving each side a reasonable treatment, you will do a better job of convincing your reader that you know both sides and have made a valid judgment.

**Avoid a choppy essay.** Whether you organize your essay by the Point-by-Point Pattern or the Block Pattern, you need to use enough transitional devices to ensure a smooth flow from one subject to another and from one point to the next. Without transitions, your essay

may assume the distracting movement of a Ping-Pong game, as you switch back and forth between discussions of your two subjects. Listed here are some appropriate words to link your points:

**Comparison**

also  
similarly  
too  
both  
like  
not only . . . but also  
have in common  
share the same  
in the same manner

**Contrast**

however  
on the contrary  
on the other hand  
in contrast  
although  
unlike  
though  
instead of  
but

**Sample Student Essays**

Because there are two popular ways to develop comparison/contrast essays, this section offers two student essays so that each pattern is illustrated.

**I. The Point-by-Point Pattern**

Note that this writer takes a definite stand—that local food co-ops are superior to chain grocery stores—and then contrasts two local stores, Lane Grocer and the Fort Collins, Colorado, Co-op, to prove her thesis. She selected the Point-by-Point Pattern to organize her essay, contrasting prices, atmosphere, and benefits to local producers. See if you can identify her transitional devices as well as some of her uses of detail that make the essay more interesting and convincing.

**BRINGING BACK THE JOY OF MARKET DAY**

- 1      Now that the old family-run corner grocery is almost extinct, many people are banding together to form their own neighborhood stores as food cooperatives. Locally owned by their members, food

Thesis	co-ops such as the one here in Fort Collins are welcome alternatives to the impersonal chain-store markets such as Lane Grocer. In exchange for volunteering a few hours each month, co-op members share savings and a friendly experience while they shop; local producers gain loyal, local support from the members as well as better prices for their goods in return for providing the freshest, purest food possible.
Essay map	
Point one: Prices	2 Perhaps the most crucial distinction between the two kinds of stores is that while supermarkets are set up to generate profit for their corporations, co-ops are nonprofit groups whose main purpose is to provide their members and the community with good, inexpensive food and basic household needs. At first glance, supermarkets such as Lane Grocer may appear to be cheaper because they offer so many specials, which they emphasize heavily through ads and in-store promotions. These special deals, known as "loss-leaders" in the retail industry, are more than compensated by the extremely high markups on other products. For example, around Thanksgiving Lane Grocer might have a sale on flour and shortening and then set up the displays with utmost care so that as customers reach for the flour they will be drawn to colorful bottles of pie spices, fancy jars of mincemeat, or maybe an inviting bin of fresh-roasted holiday nuts, all of which may be marked up 100% or more—way above what is being lost on the flour and shortening.
Examples of Lane Grocer's prices contrasted to examples of co-op prices	3 The Fort Collins Co-op rarely bothers with such pricing gimmicks; instead, it tries to have a consistent markup—just enough to meet overhead expenses. The flour at the co-op may cost an extra few cents, but that same fancy spice bottle that costs over \$1.00 from the supermarket display can be refilled at the co-op for less than 25¢. The nuts, considered by regular groceries as a seasonal "gourmet" item, are

sold at the co-op for about two-thirds the price. Great savings like these are achieved by buying in bulk and having customers bag their own groceries. Recycled containers are used as much as possible, cutting down substantially on overhead. Buying in bulk may seem awkward at first, but the extra time spent bagging and weighing their own food results in welcome savings for co-op members.

- 4 Once people have become accustomed to bringing their own containers and taking part in the work at the co-ops, they often find that it's actually more fun to shop in the friendly, relaxed atmosphere of the co-ops. At Lane Grocer, for example, I often find shopping a battle of tangled metal carts wielded by bored customers who are frequently trying to manage one or more cranky children. The long aisles harshly lit by rows of cold fluorescent lights and the bland commercial music don't make the chore of shopping any easier either. On the other hand, the Fort Collins Co-op may not be as expertly planned, but at least the chaos is carried on in a friendly way. Parents especially appreciate that they can safely let their children loose while they shop because in the small, open-spaced co-op even toddlers don't become lost as they do in the aisles of towering supermarket shelves. Moreover, most members are willing to look after the children of other members if necessary. And while they shop, members can choose to listen to the FM radio or simply to enjoy each other's company in relative quiet.

- 5 As well as benefiting member consumers, co-ops also help small local producers by providing a direct market for their goods. Large chain stores may require minimum wholesale quantities far beyond the capacity of an individual producer, and mass markets like Lane Grocer often feel they are "too big" to negotiate with small local producers. But because of their small, independent nature, co-ops welcome the chance to buy direct from the grower or producer.

Point two:  
Atmosphere

Description of  
Lane Grocer's  
atmosphere  
contrasted to  
description of  
the co-op's  
atmosphere

Point three:  
Benefits to  
local producers



No benefits at Lane Grocer contrasted to two benefits at the co-op

Direct selling offers two advantages for producers: they get a better price for their wares than by selling them through wholesalers, and at the same time they establish an independent reputation for their business, which can be immensely valuable to their success later on. In Fort Collins, for example, Luna tofu (bean curd) stands out as an excellent illustration of this kind of mutual support. Several years ago my friend Carol Jones began making tofu in small batches to sell to the co-op as a way to earn a part-time income as well as to contribute to the co-op. Her enterprise has now grown so well that last year her husband quit his job to go into business with her full time. She currently sells to distributors and independent stores from here to Denver; even Lane Grocer, which earlier would not consider selling her tofu even on a trial basis, is now thinking about changing its policy.

Conclusion: Summarizing the advantages of co-ops over chain stores

6 Of course, not all co-ops are like the one here in Fort Collins, but that is one of their best features. Each one reflects the personalities of its members, unlike the supermarket chain stores that vary only slightly. Most important, though, while each has a distinctive character, co-ops share common goals of providing members with high-quality, low-cost food in a friendly, cooperative spirit.

## II. The Block Pattern

After thinking through both methods of development, a second student writer chose the Block Pattern to contrast two kinds of backyards. He felt it was more effective to give his readers a complete sense of his first backyard, with its spirit of wildness, instead of addressing each point of the contrast separately, as did the first student writer in this section. Do you agree with his choice? Why or why not? Note, too, the ways in which this writer tries to avoid the “split essay” problem by making clear connections between the new yard and the older one.

## BACKYARDS: OLD AND NEW

1 Most of the time I like getting something new—new clothes, new CDs, new video games. I look forward to making new friends and visiting new places. But sometimes new isn't better than old. Five years ago, when my family moved to a house in a new area, I learned that a new, neat backyard can never be as wonderful as a rambling, untamed yard of an older house.

Thesis

2 My first yard, behind our older house, was huge, the size of three normal backyards, but completely irregular in shape. Our property line zagged in and out around old, tall trees in a lot shaped like a large pie piece from which some giant had taken random bites. The left side was taken up by a lopsided garden that sometimes grew tomatoes but mainly wild raspberries, an odd assortment of overgrown bushes, and wildflowers of mismatched shapes and sizes. The middle part had grass and scattered shade trees, some that were good for climbing. The grassy part drifted off into an area with large old evergreen trees surrounded by a tall tangle of vines and bushes that my parents called "the Wild Spot," which they had carefully ignored for years. The whole yard sloped downhill, which with the irregular shape and the trees, made my job of mowing the grass a creative challenge.

Block A:  
The older,  
"untamed"  
backyard

(Landscape  
variety:  
Irregular lot  
size and shape;  
trees, rambling  
mix of bushes,  
flowers, berries,  
and vines)

3 Despite the mowing problem, there was something magical about that untamed yard. We kids made a path through the Wild Spot and had a secret hideout in the brush. Hidden from adult eyes, my friends and I sat around a pretend fire ring, made up adventures (lost in the jungle!), asked each other Important Questions (better to be a rock star or a baseball player?), and shared our secret fears (being asked to dance). The yard's grassy section was big enough for throwing a football with my brother (the here-and-there trees made catching long passes even more

(Family  
activities)

spectacular), and my twin sisters invented gymnastic routines that rolled them downhill. Mom picked vegetables and flowers when she felt like it. It seemed like someone, family or friend, was always in our yard doing something fun.

Transition to  
Block 8: The  
new backyard  
(contrasting  
bland  
landscape)

4 When all the kids were teenagers, my parents finally decided we needed more space, so we moved into a house in a new development. Although the house itself was better (more bathrooms), the new backyard, in comparison to our older one, was a total disappointment. New Backyard was neat, tidy, tiny, flat, square, and completely fenced. There were not only no big old trees for shade or for climbing—there were no trees at all. My parents had to plant a few, which looked like big twigs stuck in the ground. No untamed tangles of bushes and flowers there—only identical fire hydrant-sized shrubs planted evenly every few feet in narrow, even beds along the fence. The rest of this totally flat yard was grass, easy to mow in mere minutes, but no challenge either. No wild berry bushes or rambling vegetable gardens were allowed in the new development. No wild anything at all, to be exact.

(Few activities)

5 Nothing wild and no variety: that was the problem. To put it bluntly, the yard was neat but boring. Every inch of it was open to inspection; it held no secret spaces for the imagination to fill. There was no privacy either as our yard looked directly into the almost duplicate bland yards of the neighbors on all sides. The yard was too small to do any real physical activity in it; going out for a long pass would mean automatic collision with the chain link fence in any direction. My sisters' dance routines soon dissolved under our neighbors' eyes, and our tomatoes came from the grocery store. With no hidden nooks, no interesting landscape, and no tumbling space, our family just didn't go into the backyard very often. Unlike the older, overgrown backyard that was always inviting someone to play, the new backyard wasn't fun for anyone.

6 Over the last five years, the trees have grown and the yard looks better, not so sterile and empty. I guess all new yards are on their way to becoming old yards eventually. But it takes decades and that is too slow for me. New houses have lots of modern conveniences, but I hope if I am lucky enough to own my own place someday, I will remember that when it comes to backyards, old is always better than new.

Conclusion:  
A future  
preference  
based on  
essay's thesis

## ESSAY TOPICS

Here are some topics that may be compared or contrasted.

1. Two jobs, bosses, or employers (or your current job and your dream job)
2. Two places that are special for you in different ways
3. Two places you've lived or visited or two schools you've attended
4. Two jobs, bosses, or employers (or your current job and your dream job)
5. Two instructors or coaches whose teaching styles are effective but different
6. Mother and father
7. Doctors and nurses
8. Two cities
9. Two siblings
10. Two friends
11. Two restaurants
12. Two cars
13. Two sports
14. Two sports stars
15. Two diets
16. Two types of teachers or bosses
17. Two classes
18. Two airlines
19. Two movies

## Comparison and Contrast Signal Words

The second key to writing successful comparison/contrast essays is the appropriate use of comparison and contrast signal words. These are words that introduce points of comparison and points of contrast. It is not sufficient simply to describe each item that you are comparing. You must refer back and forth to, for example, Job X and Job Y and use comparison and contrast signal words to show what is the same and

'what is different about them. Of course, you should also use transition signals such as *first*, *second*, *one . . .*, *another . . .*, *the final . . .*, *for example*, and *in conclusion* in addition to these special ones.

The following chart lists some of the words and phrases used to discuss similarities.

### Comparison Signal Words

Transition Words and Phrases	
similarly likewise	Human workers can detect malfunctions in machinery; <b>similarly/likewise</b> , a robot can be programmed to detect equipment malfunctions.
also	Human workers can detect malfunctions in machinery; a robot can <b>also</b> .
too	Human workers can detect malfunctions in machinery; a robot can <b>too</b> .
Subordinators	
as just as	Robots can detect malfunctions in machinery, <b>as/just as</b> human workers can. <i>Note: Use a comma when as and just as show comparison even when the dependent clause follows the independent clause as in the above example.</i>

## Comparison Signal Words (continued)

Coordinators	
and	Robots <b>and</b> human workers can detect malfunctions in machinery.
both . . . and	<b>Both</b> robots <b>and</b> human workers can detect malfunctions in machinery.
not only . . . but also	<b>Not only</b> robots <b>but also</b> human workers can detect malfunctions in machinery.
neither . . . nor	<b>Neither</b> robots <b>nor</b> human workers are infallible. <sup>1</sup>
Others	
like (+ noun) just like (+ noun) similar to (+ noun)	Robots, <b>like/just like/similar to</b> human workers, can detect malfunctions in machinery.
(be) like (be) similar (to) (be) the same as	Robots <b>are like/are similar to/are the same as</b> human workers in their ability to detect malfunctions in machinery.
(be) the same	In their ability to detect malfunctions in machinery, robots and human workers <b>are the same</b> .
(be) alike (be) similar	Robots and human workers <b>are alike/are similar</b> in their ability to detect malfunctions in machinery.
to compare (to/with)	Robots can <b>be compared to/be compared with</b> human workers in their ability to detect malfunctions in machinery.

## Contrast signal Words

Contrast signal words fall into two main groups according to their meaning. The words in the first group show a relationship that is called *concession*. The words in the second group show an opposition relationship.

### Contrast Signal Words: Concession (Unexpected Result)

Concession signal words indicate that the information in one clause is not the result you expect from the information given in the other clause.

UNEXPECTED RESULT

Although I studied all night, I failed the exam.

<b>Transition Words and Phrases</b>	
however nevertheless nonetheless still	Millions of people go on diets every year; <b>however/nevertheless/nonetheless/still</b> , very few succeed in losing weight.
<b>Subordinators</b>	
although even though though	<b>Although/Even though/Though</b> most dieters initially lose a few pounds, most gain them back again within a few weeks.
<b>Coordinators</b>	
but yet	Doctors say that "fad" diets do not work, <b>but/yet</b> many people still try them.
<b>Others</b>	
despite (+ noun) in spite of (+ noun)	<b>Despite/In spite of</b> 10 years of dieting, I am still fat.

### **Contrast Signal Words: Direct Opposition**

The second group of contrast signal words shows that two things are direct opposites. With direct opposites, the signal word can introduce either piece of information.

I am short, whereas my brother is tall. OR My brother is tall, whereas I am short.

Transition Words and Phrases	
<p>however in contrast in (by) comparison on the other hand</p> <p>on the contrary</p>	<p>Rock music is primarily the music of white performers; <b>however/ in contrast/in comparison/by comparison/on the other hand</b>, jazz is performed by both white and black musicians.</p> <p>Jazz is not just one style of music; <b>on the contrary</b>, jazz has many styles such as Chicago jazz, Dixieland, ragtime, swing, bebop, and cool jazz, to name just a few.</p> <p><i>Note: On the contrary</i> contrasts a truth and an untruth.</p>
Subordinators	
<p>while whereas</p>	<p>New Orleans-style jazz features brass marching-band instruments, <b>while/whereas</b> ragtime is played on a piano.</p> <p><i>Note: Use a comma with while and whereas even when the dependent clause follows the independent clause.</i></p>
Coordinators	
<p>but</p>	<p>Jazz music was born in the southern part of the United States, <b>but</b> it now enjoys a worldwide audience.</p>
Others	
<p>differ (from)</p> <p>compared (to/with)</p> <p>(be) different (from)</p> <p>(be) dissimilar to</p> <p>(be) unlike</p>	<p>Present-day rock music <b>differs from</b> early rock music in several ways.</p> <p>Present-day rock music has a harder sound <b>compared to/compared with</b> early rock.</p> <p>The punk, rap, grunge, and techno styles of today are very <b>different from/ dissimilar to/unlike</b> the rock music performed by Elvis Presley 50 years ago, but they have the same roots.</p> <p><b>Unlike</b> rock, a music style started by white musicians, rhythm-and-blues styles were influenced primarily by black musicians.</p>