Writing a Comparison-Contrast Essay

Picture this situation: You have just moved to a new neighborhood and attended your first day at a new school. Your best friend at your old school is dying to know what your new school is like. Is your new science teacher as spirited as your last one? Are your classes still on block schedule? Are the graduation requirements similar? Does the new school offer the same extracurricular activities, or are there different ones? In an e-mail to your friend, you describe the similarities and differences between your new school and your old one. That is, you compare and contrast the two schools to help your friend more easily understand your ideas.

Comparing and contrasting are two natural ways you seek to understand the world around you. This understanding can help you to make informed decisions and sound judgments. In this Writing Workshop, you will have a chance to plan, organize, and write a comparison-contrast essay about two subjects that you choose on your own.

WHAT'S AHEAD?
In this workshop, you will write an essay comparing and contrasting two subjects. You will also learn how to
- determine relevant features
- form a thesis
- use the block method or the point-by-point method
- use comparative and superlative forms
- avoid worn-out adverbs

Prewriting: Choose Two Subjects

Pick and Choose When you write a comparison-contrast essay, you focus on the similarities or the differences (or both) of two subjects in order to understand them better. To get started, you first must decide which two subjects you will compare and contrast.

- If you have ever wondered how two things are different or similar, you could compare and contrast them to find out. For example, you might wonder how the trumpet and the trombone are alike and different.

- Think about any time you have to make a choice between two things. If your family is thinking about buying a computer or a car, for instance, but can’t decide between two models, you could compare and contrast the models to help make the choice clearer.

- Think about your hobbies and interests. If you are a fan of the Star Wars movies, you might compare and contrast the latest movie in the series with an earlier one. Similarly, if you are a sports enthusiast who likes both snowskiing and waterskiing, you might compare and contrast the two sports.

As you think of possible subjects, ask yourself the following questions to determine whether the subjects can be developed well in a comparison contrast essay.

- Do the subjects have something in common? The subjects must have at least one basic similarity. For instance, you could compare watching movies on videotape to watching movies in theaters because both are ways to view a common form of entertainment—movies.
Do the subjects have significant differences? The subjects you choose must be different enough to be interesting. For example, the differences in the cost, the convenience, and the experience of watching videos at home and seeing movies in theaters are significant enough to make for an interesting essay.

Remember to choose subjects that can be easily compared in a short essay. Comparing all forms of live entertainment with all forms of prerecorded entertainment, for instance, would be too much to accomplish. However, comparing home video viewing with watching movies in theaters is manageable. After you have found two subjects that you think will work, jot them down in a notebook or journal.

Consider Purpose, Audience, and Tone

Thinking of the Why, the Who, and the How

You will communicate more clearly with your audience if you are sure of why you are writing—that is, if you have your purpose clearly in mind. The main purpose of this comparison-contrast piece is to inform your readers about your subjects. To begin, you must first determine which aspects of your subjects you want to discuss: their similarities, their differences, or both.

To do this, think about the focus of your paper.

If your purpose were to show your readers how softball and baseball are alike, you would write an essay about their similarities.

If your purpose were to inform your readers about the differences between owning a cat and owning a dog, you would write an essay about differences.

If your purpose were to explain to your readers how the Sahara and the Mojave deserts have both similar and different characteristics, you would write an essay about both similarities and differences.

In order for your writing to be as informative as it can be, you should carefully consider who your intended audience is—who your readers are.

You must also consider what those readers already know about your subject so you can define terms and provide necessary background information. For example, suppose that you were planning to write an essay contrasting owning a cat and owning a dog. If you were writing for an audience of cat owners, you would include more details about owning a dog. Your readers would already be familiar with cat ownership—you would not have to include as many details about it. To help you decide what kinds of information you should include for your readers, ask yourself the following questions.

What do your readers already know about your two subjects?
Is one subject more familiar to them than the other?
What facts and information will your readers want to know about the two subjects?

Finally, you should decide on the tone of your writing, or how you will present your message. Tone is like the personality of your writing. Whether you are serious, funny, casual, or formal, your tone is created by the details, words, rhythms, and sounds of language that you choose. Writers of informative pieces, such as comparison-contrast essays, usually use a clear, authoritative tone because they want to sound knowledgeable about their subjects. You might decide, however, that a humorous tone is more fitting for your essay. For example, humor might be appropriate in an essay comparing and contrasting a satirical novel with its movie version. The tone you use depends on the purpose of your writing, on your intended audience, and on the subjects you are comparing and contrasting.
Gather Information and Determine Relevant Features

Get the Facts In order to discuss your two subjects seriously, you must gather information about them. Information you will want to gather includes definitions, facts, statistics, and descriptions of the distinct characteristics of each subject. Some of this information may come from your own knowledge or experience, but most often you will need to research information, even if only to support the claims you make based on what you know.

Where you get the information for your essay will depend on your two subjects. You might go to a library for books or articles written about the subjects. You might search the Internet for information as well, or interview people who are experts on the subjects. Once you have gathered the information that you will include in your comparison-contrast essay, you will begin to identify your two subjects’ relevant features. Relevant features are the important characteristics of your two subjects; they provide the main points for supporting your thesis. These features are called relevant because they are important, or significant, to the understanding of the two subjects.

The relevant features you choose depend on your audience. If you are writing for the general public, you might contrast features of general interest. On the other hand, if your intended audience consists of experts or enthusiasts on your subjects, you might choose specific relevant features that would interest them more.

Take the following steps to determine possible relevant features for your subjects. The chart that follows the steps shows how a student determined relevant features for an essay contrasting watching movies in the theater with watching videos at home.
A Writer’s Model

The following essay, which is a final draft, closely follows the framework on the previous page, using the point-by-point method to contrast watching movies in a theater with watching videos at home.

Movie? Video? What Is the Difference?

You and a couple of friends are trying to decide what to do on a Friday night. One friend asks, “Want to go to the movies?” The other chimes in with, “A movie? No way! How about a video?” As they argue back and forth you may be tempted to say, “Movie, video—who cares? What difference is there anyway?” When you stop to think about it, though, you will realize that there are very real differences in comfort, cost, control, and quality between watching movies and watching videos.

Comfort is one way that watching a video at home and watching a movie in a local theater differ. At home, you can stretch out on the sofa, curl up in a recliner, or even sprawl out on the floor as you watch. Also, when you enjoy a video at home, you can relax and talk with your friends. In a theater, you are confined to one seat—often behind someone who is so tall that you cannot see. If you happen to whisper a comment to a friend, you are likely to get a glare or a disgusted “Sh!” from someone else in the audience.

Another obvious difference between the two ways of watching a film relates to cost. You can rent a video to play at home for just a few dollars—no matter how many people watch it. Furthermore, you can buy inexpensive grocery-store snacks to enjoy with the video. Admission for a movie in a theater, on the other hand, can cost twice as much as a video rental—and that is the price for just one person. If the high prices for popcorn, drinks, and other snacks are added, the cost can really mount up.

An additional point to consider is control. Thanks to the VCR’s versatility, viewers can stop a video if they need to leave the room, and then hit PLAY when they return—and not miss a single line of dialogue. If your attention is lagging or you are just too tired to finish a video, you can stop the tape and finish watching it the next day. At a theater, if a person tries heading out to the concession stand for another bag of popcorn, he or she will be sure to miss the most dramatic part of the movie—with no way to rewind it and see what was missed. Since you have to pay the full admission price every time you see a movie at a theater, you will probably choose to sit through the entire movie in spite of lagging attention or tiredness.

When just the differences in comfort, cost, and control are considered, watching videos at home seems like the clear choice. So what, if anything, is better about watching a movie in a theater? That question can be answered in a single word: quality. A movie seen on a TV screen does not compare to the rich color and clarity of a movie seen on a big screen in a theater. Some may argue that home theater quality is getting better with large digital televisions, surround sound, and digital sound and video technology. Still, theater technology keeps improving on already excellent sound and projection quality, promising to continue surpassing home theater systems. For some people, the difference in quality far outweighs any other considerations.

When you think about comfort, cost, control, and quality, it is easy to see how friends could disagree about whether watching a movie at home or in a theater is better. Maybe one is not better than the other. Clearly, they both have their advantages. It is true—videos are cheaper and controllable, but would you want to see the latest action-packed movie on a TV set or on the big screen?