

*Essay and Paragraph Development Tutorial*

**Tutorial 27:**  
**Comparing and Contrasting**

This Tutorial includes two files:

- **Lesson (27a\_Comparing\_and\_Contrasting\_Lesson)**

In order to learn the material presented in this tutorial more effectively, as you read you should take notes in a place that you can reference later. If it is convenient, you could print the tutorial and annotate it so you can keep it for future reference.

- **Exercises (27b\_Comparing\_and\_Contrasting\_Exercises** – located in the same area as the lesson)

- It has highlighted areas for you to answer the exercises using an application such as Adobe Acrobat Reader.
- Download and save this file as your own; you will share it with an instructor after you complete the lesson and exercises.

Please contact the Writing Center with any questions or difficulties:

[csmtwc@smccd.edu](mailto:csmtwc@smccd.edu) or 650-574-6436.

## Comparing and Contrasting

This tutorial will give you some guidelines and practice for organizing an essay by comparing—explaining the similarities between things—and/or contrasting—explaining the differences. Although you may not have received an essay assignment that specifically asks you to compare and/or contrast two or more things, you may find uses for the organizational patterns and idea-generating practices explained in this tutorial in a wide variety of writing tasks—describing different places, making decisions or recommendations, trying to argue a position or persuade an audience, and so on.

Consider the following examples:

- From an advice column:

Dear Annie,

Last week I had an experience that I guess many women would find thrilling. I received not one but *two* proposals of marriage, both from wonderful men, whom I will call Fred and Bob. I am flattered of course, but I am having a hard time choosing.

Fred has a good job as a butcher at the local Piggly Wiggly and is one of the most honest, sensitive men I have ever met. He always brings me flowers when he comes to visit me at work, and even though I know he steals them and I know where he gets them (I work at a cemetery), I am always touched. At the same time, I must admit that I am not physically attracted to Fred, who resembles a cross between a pitbull and a banana slug.

On the other hand, I am *very* attracted to Bob but worry about him in other ways. I just love to stare at the black dagger tattoos on his beefy biceps and the skull and crossbones nose ring he wears. When he gets out of jail, Bob promises that he will do whatever he can to make me happy, but I'm not sure he will give up his criminal ways.

Annie, which man should I marry?

- From an advertisement:

Do you want a fast track to a future of fancy cars, long paid vacations, and beautiful people, or would you rather sit around in some college thinking, writing, reading, and stuff like that for four more years? Both require hard work, but only one can guarantee you \$6 an hour! Call 1-800 SUC-KERS to learn about an exciting new business opportunity!!!

Both of these real world writing examples make use of a strategy that you yourself use all the time: they compare things by looking at how they are similar and contrast things by looking at how they are different. You may have done this very recently if you had to choose a place to live, a college major, or a new job. Making a major decision often requires thinking about different options, and thinking it through carefully often requires that you spend some time both **comparing** (looking at similarities) and **contrasting** (looking at differences).

While this tutorial will *not* give you a simple format for something called “the comparison contrast essay,” it will give you some practice with strategies that will help you generate ideas, organize your thoughts, and show transitions in your writing so that your readers will follow along. Using these strategies can help you with some of the difficulties that all writers face.

## Getting Started

On the very first day of her first semester writing course in college, Geneva receives the following assignment as homework:

In a short (3-5 pages) essay, explain whether you believe your own school experiences so far have been mostly positive or negative. Try to use plenty of specific examples from your experiences to support a thesis that makes a point about education in general.

This is the kind of open-ended assignment that many students find intimidating. What does this teacher want? Why does she assign this on the first stinking day? And does she really think 3-5 pages is “short?”

After brainstorming for a while, Geneva realized that she had a unique experience, having attended both an open admissions public high school and an expensive, exclusive private high school. A good way to organize her essay might be to compare and contrast these two school systems in order to make a general point about private versus public education.

She begins generating ideas by writing out a list of all the major things she can remember from both schools:

### PRIVATE HIGH SCHOOL

small classes—15 students max

expensive

teachers strict

dress code: black and white only—uniforms

good, healthy food in cafeteria

some students snotty

same religion for all students: Catholic

felt guilty not studying (waste my parents' \$!)

lots of cliques

homework and tests—tons

brand new textbooks

### PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL

big classes—25-40 students in most

free

teachers not strict at all

wear (almost) anything—no gang colors or short skirts, otherwise OK

cafeteria food so bad we all go to McDonald's

some students snotty

many different religions—Jewish, Protestant, Muslim, Buddhist, and so on—met lots of new people

didn't do much homework, didn't care

lots of cliques

homework and tests—tons

old textbooks

A list such as this one is a great place to start generating ideas for an essay that uses comparison and contrast. Geneva has some information that she can describe in her essay as she tries to make a general point about which experience was better for her. Notice that some of the information shows similarities (grounds for comparison) while some shows differences (grounds for contrast).

Throughout this tutorial, you will be developing a topic by using the same strategies Geneva uses to develop her comparison/contrast of public and private high school.

**Please open your 27b exercises file and complete Exercise 1.**

## Noticing Similarities and Differences

As Geneva was writing her list, she noticed both similarities and differences between the two schools. This is an important part of essays that ask you to *both* compare *and* contrast two things and is often useful even in writing that does not require both. Sometimes it helps to write out the similarities and differences together or to draw lines connecting your two columns.

Geneva creates new lists to see the similarities and differences:

### Public and Private: Similarities

snotty students  
cliques  
lots of homework and tests

### Public and Private: Differences

Private School: smaller classes  
more strict teachers  
dress code  
good food  
same religion for all students  
I felt pressured to study  
had up-to-date textbooks

**Please open your 27b exercises file and complete Exercise 2.**

## Classifying by Creating Categories

Sometimes it is more helpful to create categories for the things you are comparing and contrasting rather than just listing how they are similar and different.

Creating categories requires you to think of similarities between things that you may not have noticed as you listed them at first.

For example, consider the following random list of college courses that a group of students might take in the first two years:

- English Composition
- Business Math
- Second Year Astronomy
- Symbolic Logic
- Second Year Computer Programming
- Basic Chemistry
- African History
- Shakespeare
- Cultural Anthropology
- The Films Of Keanu Reeves
- First Year Arabic
- Psychology
- Philosophy
- Music Appreciation
- Art History

In order to explain their graduation requirements, colleges often categorize these courses in groups according to the different sets of skills they require and teach:

- Courses that require math and logic
  - Business Math
  - Symbolic Logic
  - Second Year Computer Programming
  - Second Year Astronomy
- Courses that require extensive reading and writing
  - English Composition
  - African History
  - Shakespeare
  - Cultural Anthropology
  - Philosophy
  - Art History
- Courses that build awareness and appreciation of the arts
  - Music Appreciation
  - Art History
  - African History
  - The Films of Keanu Reeves

But students often create their own categories organized around their own agendas: “courses I am dreading” might be a category, or “courses that sound interesting,” or “courses that will help in my

career.” The categories you create to organize information often depend on what your goals are. And, as with the school courses above, your items may fall into more than one category.

Geneva might create categories for the information she has listed under “similarities” and “differences” that allow her to organize around concepts beyond just what the two schools have in common and how they are different. For example:

- Ways of controlling students
  - dress codes (private)
  - strict teachers (private)
  - lots of homework (both public and private)
- Ways I felt pressured and stressed
  - cliques and snotty students (both)
  - lots of homework (both)
  - parents spending a lot of \$ (private)
  - strict teachers (private)

The point of creating these broader categories is that they can allow you to see your data—the simple lists of information you have already produced—in new ways, allowing you to organize an essay that is more meaningful to you.

The categories can also help you begin thinking of possible *thesis statements* if you have not already. For example, Geneva might consider a thesis that points out that “For me and many other students, the atmosphere of the private school was both more controlling and more stressful.”

**Please open your 27b exercises file and complete Exercise 3.**

## Organizing by Outlining

How you go about organizing your essay will depend on many different factors such as your intended audience (how much will your readers already know about the subject?) and your purpose in making the comparison. But the outlines included in this section are a good way to think about how your organization might make the information you are presenting clear to your readers for a variety of subjects.

### The Parallel Method

When you use the parallel method, you simply present all of the information you have on your first topic and then do the same for your second.

- Introduction: Provides background information and presents a thesis statement about the topics being discussed
- Section on Topic A
  - one quality of topic A

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- second quality of topic A
  - third quality of topic A
  - (and so on, depending on the topic)
- Section on Topic B
  - one quality of topic B
  - second quality of topic B
  - third quality of topic B
  - (and so on, depending on the topic)
- Conclusion: Sums up the major issue or makes a recommendation based on the information provided

For Geneva's information, the outline might look like this:

- Introduction: Explains why people debate about public and private schools and presents my thesis that private schools created more stress for me and many other students
- Section on Public Schools
  - laid back teachers
  - didn't feel pressured to study
  - lots of homework and tests
  - students can dress however they want, almost
- Section on Private Schools
  - strict teachers
  - felt pressured to study
  - lots of homework and tests
  - uniforms only
- Conclusion: private schools created the kind of pressure that forced me to learn a little more but made me hate school more than ever

Notice that the items under each section are similarities or differences of the qualities being compared—laid back teachers versus strict teachers, for example. Also notice that these are *sections*, not paragraphs; Geneva's actual essay, like yours, may involve several paragraphs on her first topic before moving on to her second.

This may seem to be the easiest way to create an outline, but whether it will work for your final essay depends in part on how much information you are presenting. If you are discussing something fairly detailed and complex, you may write many paragraphs or even pages about topic A before moving on to topic B, by which time some of your less attentive readers may not remember the more subtle details of topic A.

**Please open your 27b exercises file and complete Exercise 4.**



## The Point By Point Method

This method allows you to show similarities and differences between your topics one at a time, often by using categories such as those you created in exercise three.

- Introduction: Provides background information and presents a thesis statement about the topics being discussed
- One quality of both A and B
- A second quality of both A and B
- A third quality of both A and B
- A fourth quality of both A and B
- and so on, depending on the information
- Conclusion: Sums up the major issue or makes a recommendation based on the information provided

Using this method, Geneva's outline might become:

- Introduction: (as above) Explains why people debate about public and private schools and presents my thesis that private schools created more stress for me and many other students
- Uniforms versus open clothing policy
- homework and tests in both schools
- pressure to study--different in public and private schools
- cliques and snotty students in both schools
- Conclusion: (as above) private schools created the kind of pressure that forced me to learn a little more but made me hate school more than ever

Notice that the qualities listed in the point-by-point comparison can be similar or different---one section in Geneva's essay might compare the cliques in both schools while another section contrasts the different pressures to study.

**Please open your 27b exercises file and complete Exercise 5.**

## The Similarities and Differences Method

This method allows you to focus first on all the qualities that your two issues have in common, then on the differences; of course you can also do this in reverse, focusing first on the differences and then the similarities. What order you choose may depend on what conclusion you want readers to remember. Are the differences more important than the similarities? If so, then you might put the differences second. If you are arguing that the similarities are more important, then putting the similarities after the differences might make the point more effectively.

- Introduction: As above
- Similar qualities of A and B
  - First similarity
  - Second similarity
  - Third Similarity
  - and so on
- Different qualities of A and B
  - First difference
  - Second Difference
  - Third difference
  - and so on

- Conclusion: as above

It does not matter if you have the same number of similarities and differences in each section; the point is to organize them clearly so that readers will find them in the same sections of your paper.

To use the example of Geneva's possible outline again, an outline focusing on similarities and differences might look like this:

- Introduction: as above
- Section on similarities between public and private school systems
  - cliques and snotty students in both
  - lots of homework and tests in both

- Section on differences between public and private
  - private requires dress code
  - less religious and cultural diversity in private school
  - teachers more loose and open ended in public school
- Conclusion: as above

**Please open your 27b exercises file and complete Exercise 6.**

## Writing the Essay

A strong outline can provide you with guidelines that you should keep in mind when you are organizing your essay. You should not, however, feel the need to stick completely to your outline without making any changes. If you realize as you are writing that you have new ideas about similarities and differences between your subjects or that you want to change your thesis statement to explain a different main point, you should feel free to do so. It is always easier to make changes to an outline than to your final essay!

## Transition Words and Phrases

If your essay is well organized, your readers will often see the connections between your ideas fairly easily. But it is often helpful to provide specific transitions between sections of your paper so that readers will be able to see when you are making a shift--moving from discussions of similarities to differences, for example, or discussing a new point.

Many specific words and phrases can help you show the logical relationships between your ideas. This tutorial will provide you with a few of the words that can help you show transitions and will give you some practice using them in sentences. If you need a refresher course in the rules for punctuation in sentences using these kinds of words, see the tutorial on *Coordination and Subordination*.

### Words and phrases that show contrast (differences between two things)

- but
- yet
- on the other hand
- in contrast
- however
- although
- though
- while
- even though

Words and phrases that show comparison (similarities between two things)

- and
- both
- in addition
- like
- as
- at the same time

**Please open your 27b exercises file and complete Exercise 7.**

### **Final Activity**

**Instructions:**

1. Review a classroom essay that you are working on and be prepared to look back at the principles and exercises in this tutorial and make notes on a separate sheet of paper. You will bring these notes and the essay to your conference.
2. Make an appointment for a conference with an instructor working in the Writing Center. To make this appointment, sign up using the same method you use to make essay conference appointments. Be sure to include a comment or note that you are meeting about a tutorial.
3. During this appointment, the instructor will make sure you understand the concepts covered in this tutorial, answer any questions that you might have, review your answers to the exercises, and check to see if you can incorporate the skill into your writing.