

CHAPTER NINE

COMPARISON AND CONTRAST



IF you are thinking of buying a new car, you will probably want to do some **COMPARISON*** shopping. You might compare the Mazda Miata to the Mitsubishi Eclipse, for example: both are sporty convertibles with similar features in about the same price range. If you're in the market for a convertible, you would be wasting your time getting a quote on a van or pickup. That would be comparing apples to oranges, and true comparisons can be made only among like kinds. Your final decision, however, will be based more on differences (in acceleration, fuel economy, trunk space) than on the similarities. Your comparison, that is, will also entail **CONTRAST**. (Strictly speaking, a *comparison* looks at both the similarities and the differences between two subjects, whereas a *contrast* looks mainly at the differences.)

Drawing comparisons in writing is a lot like comparison shopping. It points out similarities in different subjects and differences in similar ones. Consider the following comparison between two items we might normally think of as identical:

The common yo-yo is crudely made, with a thick shank between two widely spaced wooden disks. The string is knotted or stapled to the shank. With such an instrument nothing can be done except the simple up-down movement. My yo-yo, on the other hand, was a perfectly

*Words printed in **SMALL CAPITALS** are defined in the Glossary/Index.

balanced construction of hard wood, slightly weighted, flat, with only a sixteenth of an inch between the halves. The string was not attached to the shank, but looped over it in such a way as to allow the wooden part to spin freely on its own axis. The gyroscopic effect thus created kept the yo-yo stable in all attitudes.

—FRANK CONROY, *Stop-Time*

Why is Frank Conroy comparing yo-yos here? He is not going to buy one, nor is he telling the reader what kind to buy. Conroy is a man with a message: all yo-yos are not created equal. They may look alike and they may all go up and down on a string, but he points out meaningful (if you are interested in yo-yos) differences between them. There are good yo-yos, Conroy is saying, and bad yo-yos.

Once Conroy has brought together like kinds (apples to apples, yo-yos to yo-yos) and established in his own mind a basis for comparing them (the “common” kind versus “my” kind), he can proceed in one of two ways. He can dispense his information in “chunks” or in “slices” (as when selling bologna). These basic methods of organizing a comparison or contrast are sometimes called the subject-by-subject and the point-by-point methods. The subject-by-subject method treats several aspects of one subject, then discusses the same aspects of the other. So the author provides chunks of information all about one subject before moving on to the other subject. Point-by-point organization shifts back and forth between each subject, treating each point of similarity and difference before going on to the next one.

Dan Treadway uses this method in “Football vs. Asian Studies,” p. 364.

In his comparison, Conroy uses the subject-by-subject method. He first gives several traits of the inferior, “common” yo-yo (“crudely made,” string fixed to the shank, only goes up and down); then he gives contrasting traits of his superior yo-yo (“perfectly balanced,” string loops over the shank, “spins freely on its own axis”). Now let’s look at an example of a comparison that uses the point-by-point method to compare two great basketball players, Wilt (“the Stilt”) Chamberlain and Bill Russell:

Russell has been above all a team player—a man of discipline, self-denial and killer instinct; in short, a winner, in the best American Cal-

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vinist tradition. Whereas Russell has been able somehow to squeeze out his last ounce of ability, Chamberlain's performances have been marked by a seeming nonchalance—as if, recognizing his Gigantistic fate, he were more concerned with personal style than with winning. “I never want to set records. The only thing I strive for is perfection,” Chamberlain has said.

—JAMEY LARNER, “David vs. Goliath”

Paragraph by paragraph, Jamey Larner goes on like this, alternating “slices” of information about each player: Chamberlain’s free throws were always uncertain; Russell’s were always accurate in the clutch. Chamberlain was efficient; Russell was more so. Chamberlain was fast; Russell was faster. Chamberlain was Goliath at 7-feet-3-inches tall; Russell was David at 6-feet-9. The fans expected Chamberlain to lose; they expected Russell to win.

Point by point, Larner goes back and forth between his two subjects, making one meaningful (to basketball fans) distinction after another. But why, finally, is he bringing these two players together? What’s his reason for comparing them at all? Larner has a point to make, just as Conroy does when he compares two yo-yos and just as you should when you draw comparisons in your writing. The author compares these two in order to ARGUE that although the giant Chamberlain was “type-cast” by the fans to lose to Russell the giant-killer, it was Wilt “the Stilt,” defying all expectations, who (arguably) became the greatest basketball player ever. (This decision was made without consulting Michael Jordan or LeBron James.)

Whether you use chunks or slices, you can take a number of other hints from Conroy and Larner. First, choose subjects that belong to the same general class or category: two toys, two athletes, two religions, two mammals. You might point out many differences between a mattress and motorcycle, but any distinctions you make between them are not likely to be meaningful because there is little logical basis for comparing them.

Even more important, you need to have a good reason for bringing your subjects together in the first place—and a main point to make about them. Then, whether you proceed subject by subject or point by point, stick to two and only two subjects at a time.

Gary Soto compared ethnic groups, p. 390, because he wanted to get married.

And, finally, don't feel that you must always give equal weight to similarities and differences. You might want to pay more attention to the similarities if you wish to convince your parents that a two-seater convertible actually has a lot in common with the big, safe SUV they want you to consider—they both have wheels, brakes, and an engine, for example. But you might want to emphasize the differences between your two subjects if the similarities are readily apparent, as between two yo-yos and two basketball stars.

A BRIEF GUIDE TO WRITING A COMPARISON-AND-CONTRAST ESSAY

As you begin to write a comparison, you need to identify your subjects, state the basis on which you're comparing them, and indicate whether you plan to emphasize their similarities or their differences. Roger Cohen makes these basic moves of comparison in the second paragraph of his essay in this chapter:

The monkeys are part of a protracted experiment in aging being conducted by a University of Wisconsin team. Canto gets a restricted diet with 30 percent fewer calories than usual while Owen gets to eat whatever the heck he pleases.

— ROGER COHEN, "The Meaning of Life"

Cohen identifies his subjects (two monkeys), states the basis on which he is comparing them (as part of a study on aging), and indicates that he is planning to emphasize their differences (Cato's diet is restricted; Owen eats whatever he likes). Here is one more example from this chapter:

They were two strong men, these oddly different generals, and they represented the strengths of two conflicting currents that, through them, had come into final collision.

— BRUCE CATTON, "Grant and Lee: A Study in Contrasts"

The following guidelines will help you to make these basic moves as you draft a comparison. They will also help you to come up with two subjects to compare, present their similarities and differences in an organized way, and state your point in comparing them.

Coming Up with Your Subjects

The first thing you need to do when composing a comparison essay is to choose two subjects that are different in significant ways but that also have enough in common to provide a solid basis of comparison. A cruise ship and a jet, for instance, are very different machines; but both are modes of transportation, and that shared characteristic can become the basis for comparing them.

When you look for two subjects that have shared characteristics, don't stretch your comparison too far. The Duchess in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* compares mustard to flamingos because they "both bite." In the real world, however, there's no point in bringing two subjects together when the differences between them are far more significant than the similarities. Better to compare mustard and ketchup or flamingos and roseate spoonbills.

Considering Your Purpose and Audience

Suppose that you are comparing smartphones because the screen cracked on your old one and you need to replace it. In this case, your PURPOSE is to evaluate them and decide which smartphone fits your needs best. However, if you were writing the comparison for *Consumer Reports*, you would be comparing and contrasting smartphones in order to inform readers about their various functions and capabilities.

With comparisons, one size does not fit all. Whether you're writing a comparison to inform, to evaluate, or for some other purpose, always keep the specific needs of your AUDIENCE in mind. How much do your readers already know about your topic? Why should they want or need to know more? What distinctions can you make that they haven't already thought of?

Deborah Tannen
talks to teachers,
p. 397, so they'll
teach differently.

Generating Ideas: Asking How Two Things Are Alike or Different

Once you have a clear basis for comparing two subjects—flamingos and roseate spoonbills are both large pink birds; mustard and ketchup are both condiments; cruise ships and jets are both modes of transportation—look for specific points of comparison between them. Ask yourself: How, specifically, are my two subjects alike? How do they differ?

As you answer these questions, make a point-by-point list of the similarities and differences between your subjects. When you draw up your list, make sure you look at the same elements in both subjects. For example, if you are comparing two smartphone models, you might list such elements as the price, size, and accessories available for each one. Preparing such a list will help you to determine whether your two subjects are actually worth comparing—and will also help you to get the similarities and differences straight in your own mind before attempting to explain them to your audience.

Templates for Comparing

The following templates can help you to generate ideas for a comparison and then to start drafting. Don't take these as formulas where you just have to fill in the blanks. There are no easy formulas for good writing. But these templates can help you plot out some of the key moves of comparison and contrast and thus may serve as good starting points.

- ▶ X and Y can be compared on the grounds that both are _____.
- ▶ Like X, Y is also _____, _____, and _____.
- ▶ Although X and Y are both _____, the differences between them far outweigh the similarities. For example, X is _____, _____, and _____, while Y is _____, _____, and _____.

- ▶ Unlike X, Y is _____.
- ▶ Despite their obvious differences, X and Y are basically alike in that _____.
- ▶ At first glance, X and Y seem _____; however, a closer look reveals _____.
- ▶ In comparing X and Y, we can clearly see that _____.

For more techniques to help you generate ideas and start writing a comparison essay, see Chapter 2.

Organizing a Comparison

As we discussed earlier, there are fundamentally two ways to organize a comparison: point by point or subject by subject. With a point-by-point organization (like Larner's comparison of Wilt Chamberlain and Bill Russell), you discuss each point of comparison (or contrast) between your two subjects before going on to the next point. With the subject-by-subject method, you discuss each subject individually, making a number of points about one subject and then covering more or less the same points about the other subject. This is the organization Conroy follows in his comparison of yo-yos.

Which method of organization should you use? You will probably find that the point-by-point method works best for beginning and ending an essay, while the subject-by-subject method serves you well for longer stretches in the main body.

One reason for using the subject-by-subject method to organize most of your essay is that the point-by-point method, when relentlessly applied, can make the reader a little seasick as you jump back and forth from your first subject to your second. With the subject-by-subject method, you do not have to give equal weight to both subjects. The subject-by-subject method is, thus, indispensable for treating a subject in depth, whereas the point-by-point

Jeff Jacoby begins with this method on p. 368.

method is an efficient way to establish a basis of comparison at the beginning, to remind readers along the way why two subjects are being compared, and to sum up your essay at the end.

Stating Your Point

Your main point in drawing a comparison will determine whether you emphasize similarities or differences. For instance, if your thesis is that there are certain fundamental qualities that all successful coaches share—and you're comparing the best coaches from your own high school days to make this point—you will focus on the similarities among them. However, if you're comparing blind dates to make the point that it's difficult to be prepared for a blind date because no two are alike, you would focus on the differences among the blind dates you've had.

Whatever the main point of your comparison might be, state it clearly right away in an explicit **THESIS STATEMENT**: "Blind dates are inherently unpredictable; since no two are alike, the best way to go into one is with no expectations at all." Be sure to indicate to readers which you are going to emphasize—the similarities or differences between your subjects. Then, in the body of your essay, use specific points of comparison to show those similarities or differences and to prove your main point.

Providing Sufficient Points of Comparison

No matter how you organize a comparison essay, you will have to provide a sufficient number of points of comparison between your subjects to demonstrate that they are truly comparable and to justify your reasons for comparing them. How many points of comparison are enough to do the job?

Sufficiency isn't strictly a matter of numbers. It depends, in part, on just how inclined your audience is to accept (or reject) the main point your comparison is intended to make. If you are comparing subjects that your readers are not familiar with, you may have to give more examples of similarities or differences than you would if your readers already knew a lot about your subjects. For instance,

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if you're comparing the racing styles of cyclists Bradley Wiggins and Mark Cavendish, readers who think the Tour de France is a vacation package are going to require more (and more basic) points of comparison than avid cycling fans will.

To determine how many points of comparison you need to make, consider your intended readers, and choose the points of comparison you think they will find most useful, interesting, or otherwise convincing. Then give a sufficient number to get your larger point across, but not so many that you run the comparison into the ground.

EDITING FOR COMMON ERRORS IN COMPARISONS

Like other kinds of writing, comparison uses distinctive patterns of language and punctuation—and thus invites typical kinds of errors. The following tips will help you to check for (and correct) these common errors when you draw comparisons in your own writing.

Make sure all comparisons are complete

Comparisons examine at least two things at once. Check to make sure you've identified both of them; otherwise, readers may not fully understand what is being compared.

- ▶ When you enter a chapel, expect more solitude and silence than in the world outside.
- ▶ Most public chapels are not as quiet as those attached to monasteries.

Check that all comparisons are grammatically consistent

When you compare items, they should be grammatically parallel—that is, similar in grammatical form. The original version of this sentence unintentionally compares churches to a country.

- ▶ In Italy the churches seemed even older than those in France.