**How to Write a Compare-and-Contrast Essay in 8 Steps**

A compare-and-contrast essay might seem like the easiest type of paper to write: just find things that are alike and then find things that are different. Piece of cake, right? There’s a catch, however. It is up to you to argue *why* those similarities and differences matter; otherwise, you don’t have much of a paper. The following steps will guide you through the process of writing an effective compare-and-contrast essay that actually has something valuable to say.

**1) So they’re alike and they’re different. So what?** A good paper will not simply offer a summary of themes, characters, or plot. Your job is to think about how these comparisons and contrasts create meaningful connections to a larger issue.

**2) Create an effective thesis statement**. Again, you need to say *why* the comparison and contrast is worthy of note. Let’s say you want to compare and contrast the heroines of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre.* Your thesis might be this: “Although Elizabeth Bennet and Jane Eyre are very different on the outside, their shared internal values connects them in literary history and in the fight for women’s rights.” Now you have a reason for your efforts and a compelling case for your audience’s attention.

**3) Select a pattern.** There are two ways you can write a compare-and-contrast paper. You can present your arguments in a "tandem" pattern or an "alternating" pattern.

* **Tandem.** Separate your characters into two camps. For example, if you are comparing Jane Austen’s Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* to the heroine of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre,* you would list all the ways in which the protagonists are similar and different. A rough list might look something like this:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Elizabeth** | **Jane** |
| Upper class | Dirt poor, orphan |
| Beautiful | Plain |
| Outspoken | Outspoken |
| Resists marriage | Resists marriage |
| Socially inappropriate | Socially awkward |
| Ends up with her man,    and all is well | Ends up with her man, but only after trauma |

Once you have your list, the body of your paper will address everything you have discovered about one character, then everything about the other character, followed by an analysis of the two.

* **Alternating.** If you opt for this choice, you will be juxtaposing (putting side-by-side) your discussion of Elizabeth and Jane. Creating the list of similarities and differences will be handy here as well, but in using this method, you will continually address the two characters “back and forth” as you compose the body of your paper. For example, you might say, “Elizabeth is easy on the eyes, a traditional beauty, but Brontë’s Jane is continually described as plain and homely.”

**4) How to decide on a pattern.** While there is no rule about selecting one method over another, for longer papers (those that exceed five or six pages) you should probably go with the alternating pattern. It is hard for the reader to retain all the pertinent information about each side of your argument in lengthier discussions. For shorter papers, the tandem pattern will probably be the best bet.

**5) Support with primary text.** Support your analysis by providing primary textual support; in YOUR case, the primary sources are the novel *Of Mice and Men* and the play *A Raisin in the Sun*. For each point you address, whether in a tandem or an alternating pattern, offer textual evidence for your positions either by directly quoting from the text or by paraphrasing. Be sure to properly cite each quote or paraphrase in MLA format (page number in **parenthesis** following the quote).

**6) Support with secondary sources, if required.** Some instructors may ask that you use sources other than the text itself to support your argument. A secondary source is anyone other than the original author. Use secondary sources to provide additional backing for your thesis. In YOUR case, the secondary sources could be either of the poems by Langston Hughes.

**7) Include your own voice**. One of the biggest challenges for a writer is to offer his or her own take on a topic. You may feel that everyone else has already said everything there is to say about your subject. Don’t be discouraged! Your own interpretation is what is most valuable in the end.

**8) Review. Revise. Repeat.** Compare-and-contrast essays can often become convoluted if a tight check is not kept on your writing. Your comprehensive use of a variety of **transitions** is essential. Review your work often to make sure you have not suffered the sins of summarizing plot, soapboxing, or wandering pointlessly in the literary woods. Move or delete text if you have to: don’t keep trying to pound a piece into the puzzle if it clearly doesn’t fit.