Comparative Writing

The task of comparing is a fundamental part of academic writing. Your comparisons often need to be supported by a range of sources, and your writing needs to demonstrate an understanding that knowledge is often complex and controversial. Comparative writing is more than just a summary or a description of two items. It must contain evaluative comments drawn from the comparison.

The use of categories for analysis forms the basis of any comparison. These categories also help the writer to establish any contrasts that exist.

Planning comparative writing

- Establish the categories for the comparison
- List the similarities and contrasts, in order of importance.

Examples of categories for comparison

a) Comparison of two poems
   Consider: *form*, *statement*, *theme*, *tone*, *mood*, *atmosphere*, *voice*, *rhythm* and *rhyme*, *verbal* and *sound devices*.

b) Comparison of two art works
   Consider: *description*, *analysis* (including visual qualities, processes, *methods*, *materials*, *techniques*, *symbols*, *composition*, *mood*, *movement*), *interpretation* and *judgment*.

Your subject area may have established categories of analysis for comparing topics or ideas in the subject area.

Example for comparative essay

You may be given an essay question that directly instructs you to make a comparison between two points of view.

**Question:** “Compare and contrast two different theories of personality.”

1 **Identify categories for comparison.**

   Your most important task here is to decide on and name the categories of analysis you will use to make your comparison. Ask yourself how the two opinions you are comparing differ most significantly? In what ways are they most similar?

2 **Form a thesis statement.**

   Your statement of your essay’s argument or position (the thesis statement), which is included in your introduction, should identify the categories you will use to compare (and/or contrast) the different points of view you are discussing.

   **Thesis statements**

   Question: “Compare and contrast two different theories of personality.”

   Thesis statement: “This essay will argue that Freud and Rogers' theories of personality differ in their intellectual origins, their claims to scientific validity, and their understanding of the driving forces of personality, but are similar in the clinical approaches they have inspired.”

3 **Use the categories for comparison**

   The categories for comparison that the writer identifies in the thesis statements will be developed into a logical argument in the body of the essay.
Categories used to compare Freud and Rogers' theories of personality:

- Intellectual origins of the theory (i.e., the history of the opinion)
- Claims each theory makes to be testable using scientific methods (i.e., the kind of knowledge the opinion claims to be)
- What each theory has to say about one aspect of personality, that is, what drives personality (i.e., division of the opinion into significant parts, and discussion of one or more part)
- Ways the theory has been used in a clinical setting (i.e., practical outcomes of the opinion).

There are many more categories of analysis that could also be used in comparing opinions; choosing them is one of the writer’s most challenging and most interesting tasks.

Another example

Essay question: “What is the significance of the Second Vatican Council?”

Your argument (thesis statement) in response to this question might be: “Liberal and Conservative Catholics differ widely in their understandings of the significance of Vatican II.”

This thesis statement implies that there are (at least) two important opinions on the question, and that you will be comparing them.

Your thesis statement should state the categories you have chosen to compare the two opinions. Once again, your main task is to decide on and name the most effective categories for comparing your two opinions.

Essay structure

Once you have decided on the categories of analysis your essay will use to compare different opinions, you can chose to structure your essay following a “block” or “category by category” structure.

In a “block” structure you discuss one opinion in a block according to all the categories you have decided on, and then go on to discuss the next opinion, according to the same categories.

In a “category by category” structure, you proceed category by category, comparing the two different opinions according to each different category.

Since the “category-by-category” structure encourages a more analytical approach, so you should give preference to this structure for your university essays.

Connective devices

Some examples of connective devices used to compare or contrast:

a) In both cases, the researchers agreed that violence in children’s television shows was having an adverse effect on children’s behaviour.


Some further suggestions for connective devices

- particularly important
- nevertheless
- even though
- of greater concern

- in no case
- similarly
- in spite of
- however

- in the same way
- on the other hand
- not only has the writer