

COMPARISON and CONTRAST

The best comparison/contrast essays tend to focus on very specific things. Instead of comparing Shakespeare to *South Park*, they'll compare a specific Shakespeare play to a specific *South Park* episode. In fact, the very best essays will compare **one scene** in a Shakespeare play to one scene in a *South Park* episode! Along the same lines, you'll do better by comparing one Mexican holiday to a similar U.S. holiday than by comparing Mexico to the U.S. Staying with a smaller topic gives you the chance to include the kind of detail your teachers are usually looking for.

When you compare and contrast two things, you next need to decide what parts of those things you're going to discuss. Two cities? Maybe you'll want to write about the landscape, the people, and the entertainment in each. Two poems? Maybe you'll want to work about each poet's choice of words, meter, comparisons, and line length. Two argumentative essays? Maybe you'll want to show how each one uses logic and evidence to make its case.

What's important is that you compare the **same** elements (often called "points of comparison") of each subject. Don't compare the landscape and entertainment of one city to the people and architecture of another. In a short paper, you might only discuss two different points of comparison, especially if you have a lot to say about them. In another paper you might discuss three or four.

Once you've decided what you're comparing and what your points of comparison will be, you have a choice. You can either

- Discuss all your points of comparison related to one subject first, and then discuss all your points of comparison related to the other subject, or
- Write about one point at a time, showing how it applies to each subject.

The first option is sometimes called subject-by-subject organization, and it's often best for short essays. If you were writing about two football teams, for example, you could discuss the first team's passing, defense, and coaching. Then you would discuss the second team's passing, defense, and coaching. The second option is called point-by-point organization, and it works the opposite way: you discuss the passing strengths of both teams first, then both teams' defense, then both teams' coaching.

The point of a comparison and contrast essay is to help you see something new about the two things you're comparing. Your thesis, which will usually be at the end of your introduction, will tell your reader what that is. For a college paper, your thesis must **not** be that "these two things have similarities and differences." Almost any two things have similarities and differences, so that thesis doesn't show what you've noticed that's new.

If you're having trouble with a comparison/contrast thesis, try asking yourself:

- Do these two things seem similar at first, but actually turn out to be different? If so, what's the most important difference?
- Do these two things seem very different at first, but turn out to be surprisingly alike? If so, what is it that they have most in common?

Last Revised Fall 2009