

chapter 10

Writing About Comparison- Contrast and Extended Comparison-Contrast

In a theme of this type you may compare and contrast different authors, two or more works by the same author, different drafts of the same work, or characters, incidents, and ideas in the same work or different works. Not only is comparison-contrast popular in literature courses, but it is one of the more useful approaches for other disciplines. The ideas of philosophers may be compared, or views of human behavior, or economic or political theories, or approaches to painting or sculpture. The possibilities for comparison-contrast are extensive.

COMPARISON-CONTRAST AS A WAY TO KNOWLEDGE

Comparison and contrast are important ways to gain understanding because individual characteristics of a thing stand out when it is placed side by side with something else. For example, a comparison may enhance our understanding of both Shakespeare's Sonnet 30, "When to the Sessions of Sweet Silent Thought," and Christina Rossetti's lyric poem "Echo." We immediately see that both poems treat personal recollections of past experiences. In each poem, a speaker is imagined to be addressing a presumed listener, and we as readers are cast in the role of looking on and

overhearing the speech. We may notice that each poem refers to persons now dead, with whom the speaker was closely involved.

There are important differences, however. In Shakespeare's poem, the dead persons are "precious friends" who are mentioned incidentally as a part of the focus on the speaker's regret and sorrow, while Rossetti refers specifically to a dead person with whom the speaker had been in love. In fact, the speaker is addressing this dead person. Rossetti's topic is the sorrow of lost love, the irrevocability of past events, and the present loneliness of the speaker. Shakespeare includes the references to dead friends as a way of accounting for current sadness, but then his speaker turns to the present and asserts that thinking about the "dear friend" being addressed (who is alive) enables him to overcome past "losses" and "sorrows." There is no such reconciliation of past and present in Rossetti's poem; instead, the speaker focuses entirely upon the sadness of the present moment. Thus, though both poems are retrospective, Shakespeare's poem moves toward the present while Rossetti's remains in the past.

There is much more to the poems, but you may see that such comparison enables the viewing of each work in perspective and thereby facilitates understanding of the works separately. No matter what works you use for comparison-contrast, the method will be similarly effective in helping you isolate and highlight individual characteristics, because the quickest way to get at the essence of an artistic work is to compare it with something else. Similarities are brought out by comparison, and differences are shown by contrast. In other words, you can find out what a thing *is* by using comparison-contrast to discover what it *is not*.

CLARIFY YOUR INTENTION

Your first problem in planning a theme of comparison-contrast is to decide on a goal, for you may use the method in a number of ways. One objective may be the equal and mutual illumination of both (or more) works. Thus, an essay comparing O'Connor's "First Confession" with Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" (see pp. 165-70 and 150-59) might be designed (1) to compare ideas, characters, or methods in these stories equally, without stressing or favoring either. But you might also wish (2) to emphasize "Young Goodman Brown," and therefore you would use "First Confession" as material for highlighting Hawthorne's work. In addition, you might also use the comparison-contrast method (3) to show your liking of one work at the expense of another, or (4) to emphasize a method or idea that you think is especially noteworthy or appropriate.

A first task is therefore to decide what to emphasize. The first sample essay (pp. 124-25) reflects a decision to give equal time to both works being considered, without any claims for the superiority of either. Unless

you want to pursue a different rhetorical goal, you may find this essay a suitable model for most comparisons.

FIND COMMON GROUNDS FOR COMPARISON

The second stage in planning and sketching out the theme is to select the proper material—the grounds of your discussion. It is pointless to compare dissimilar things, for then your conclusions will be of limited value. You need to put the works or writers onto common ground. Compare like with like: idea with idea, characterization with characterization, imagery with imagery, point of view with point of view, problem with problem. Nothing much can be learned from a comparison of “Welty’s view of courage and Chekhov’s view of love,” but a comparison of “The relationship of love to stability and courage in Chekhov and Welty” suggests common ground, with the promise of important things to be learned through the examination of similarities and differences.

In seeking common ground, you may need to be ingenious. You know, for example, that you cannot easily add dissimilar mathematical fractions unless you first find a common denominator. The same thing applies if you compare works of literature—say, De Maupassant’s “The Necklace” and Chekhov’s *The Bear*—for this story and play seem just as unlike as three fourths and two thirds. Yet a common denominator can be found, such as “The Treatment of Self-Deceit,” “The Effects of Chance on Human Affairs,” and “The View of Women,” among others. Although at first appearance many other works may seem more dissimilar than these, it is usually possible to find a suitable frame of reference that permits analytical comparison and contrast. Much of your success in writing this theme depends on your ingenuity in finding a workable basis—a common denominator—for comparison.

METHODS OF COMPARISON

Let us assume that you have decided on your rhetorical purpose and on the basis or bases of your comparison. You have done your reading, taken your notes, and have an idea of what you want to say. The remaining problem is the treatment of your material.

A common treatment is to make your points first about one work, and then to do the same for the other. This method serves the purpose, but it has the drawback of making your paper seem like two big lumps (i.e., “work 1” takes up one half of your paper, and “work 2” takes up the other half). Also, the method causes repetition, because the treatment of the second work requires restatement of the points of comparison estab-

lished with the first. While this method is satisfactory, it has obvious defects.

A superior method, therefore, is to treat the major aspects of your main idea, and to refer to the two (or more) writers as their works support your arguments. Thus, you refer constantly to both writers, sometimes within the same sentence, and remind your reader of the point of your discussion. There are reasons for the superiority of this method: (1) You do not repeat your points needlessly, for you document them as you raise them. (2) By constantly referring to the two works in relation to your common ground of comparison, you make your points without requiring a reader with a poor memory to reread previous sections. Frequently such readers do not bother to reread (alas), and as a result they are never clear about what you have said.

As a model, here is a paragraph from a student essay on “Natural References as a Basis of Comparison in Frost’s ‘Desert Places’ and Shakespeare’s Sonnet 73, ‘That Time of Year Thou Mayest in Me Behold.’” The virtue of the paragraph is that it uses material from both poems simultaneously (as nearly as the time sequence of sentences allows) as the substance for the development of the ideas:

[1] Both writers link their ideas to events occurring in the natural world. [2] Night as a parallel with death is common to both poems, with Frost speaking about it in his first line, and Shakespeare introducing it in his seventh. [3] Along with night, Frost emphasizes the onset of winter and snow as a time of death and desolation. [4] With this natural description, Frost also symbolically refers to empty, secret, dead places in the inner spirit—crannies of the soul where bleak winter snowfalls correspond to selfishness and indifference to others. [5] By contrast, Shakespeare uses the fall season, with the yellowing and dropping of leaves and also the flying away of birds, to stress the closeness of real death and therefore also the need to love fully during the time remaining. [6] Both poems therefore share a sense of gloom, because both present death as inevitable and final, just like the oncoming season of barrenness and waste. [7] Because Shakespeare’s sonnet is addressed to a listener who is also a loved one, however, it is more outgoing than the more introspective poem of Frost. [8] Frost turns the snow, the night, and the emptiness of the universe inwardly in order to show the speaker’s inner bleakness, and by extension, the bleakness of many human spirits. [9] Shakespeare instead uses the bleakness of seasons, night, and dying fires to state the need for loving “well.” [10] The poems thus use common and similar references for different purposes and effects.

Letting *S* and *F* stand for ideas about Shakespeare and Frost respectively, the paragraph may be schematized as follows (numbers refer to the bracketed sentence numbers):

1 = F,S; 2 = F,S; 3 = F; 4 = F; 5 = S; 6 = F,S; 7 = F,S; 8 = F;
9 = S; 10 = F,S.

The scheme shows that this model paragraph links Shakespeare's references to nature with those of Frost. Half the sentences speak of both authors together; three speak of Frost alone, and two of Shakespeare alone; but all the sentences are unified topically. This interweaving of references indicates that the writer has learned both poems well enough to think of them at the same moment. Mental "digestion" has taken place.

You can learn from this example: If you develop your essay by putting your two subjects together constantly, you will write more economically and pointedly than by the first method (not only for themes, but also for tests). Beyond that, if you actually digest the material as successfully as this method indicates, you demonstrate that you have fulfilled one of the major goals of education—the assimilation and *use* of material. Too often, because you learn things separately (in separate courses, in separate works, at separate times), you may keep them distinct and compartmentalized in your mind. But instead, you should always try to relate them, to put them together, to *synthesize* them. Comparison and contrast help in this process of putting together, of seeing things not as separate fragments but as parts of wholes.

AVOID THE "TENNIS-BALL" METHOD

As you make your comparison, do not confuse an interlocking method with a "tennis-ball" method, in which you bounce your subject back and forth constantly and repetitively, almost as though you were hitting observations back and forth over a net. The tennis-ball method is shown in the following example from a comparison of the characters Mathilde (De Maupassant's "The Necklace") and Mrs. Popov (Chekhov's *The Bear*):

Mathilde is young and married, while Mrs. Popov is young and a widow. Mathilde has a social life, while Mrs. Popov is locked away in her country home with no one but her servants and her dead husband's horse. Mathilde's daydreams about wealth bring about her fussiness and her resulting misfortune, but Mrs. Popov has not been alone long enough for her to become strange or deeply hurt. Mathilde is unhappy because of her own shortcomings, and Mrs. Popov is unhappy because of her dedication to being an ideal widow. The focus in Mathilde's story is on adversity causing not only trouble but also the strengthening of character; in Mrs. Popov's story the focus is on unlikely circumstances causing an argument that produces love and a new life.

This 1,2—1,2—1,2 order might be acceptable for a few sentences, or even for a paragraph, but try to imagine an entire theme written in this way (don't scream). Aside from the repeated and unvaried patterning of subjects, the tennis-ball method does not permit much illustrative development. You should not feel so cramped that you cannot take a number of sentences to develop a point about one writer or subject before you include comparative references to another. If you remember to interlock the two

subjects of comparison, however, as in the paragraph about Frost and Shakespeare, your method will give you the freedom to develop your topics fully.

THE EXTENDED COMPARISON-CONTRAST THEME

For a longer essay, such as the sort of extended theme required at the end of a semester, comparison-contrast may be used for three, four, or many works. The extended theme may also be adapted for tests, including general, comprehensive questions. Such questions require that you treat ideas, influences, or methods in a number of works (see also pp. 139–40).

For themes of this larger scope, you will still need to develop common grounds for comparison, although with more than two works you will need to modify the method.

Let us assume that you have been assigned not just two works, but five or six. You need first to find a common ground to use as your central, unifying idea, just as you do for a comparison of only two works. When you take your notes, sketch out your ideas, make your early drafts, and rearrange and shape your developing materials, try to think about the works as they relate to your points of comparison. As an illustration, please note that the second sample theme (pp. 126–29) compares all the works on the common basis that they speak about the nature of love and devoted service. While each work is unique, they are all alike in dealing with this single topic, this "common denominator."

Once you establish a topic for comparison, you should classify or group your works on the basis of whether they are alike or different with regard to the topic. Let us assume that three or four works treat a topic in one way, while two or three do it in another. In writing about these works, you might treat the topic itself in a straightforward comparison-contrast method, but use details from the works within the groupings as the material that you use for illustration and argument. To make your theme as specific as possible, it is wise to stress only two major works with each of your subpoints. Once you have established these points in detail, there is no need to go into similar detail with all the other works being discussed. Instead, you may refer to the other works briefly, with your purpose being to strengthen your points but not to create more and more examples. Once you go to another subpoint, you may stress different works, so that by the end of your theme you will have given due attention to each work in your assignment. In this way—by treating many works as groups of twos—you can keep your essay within limits, for there is no need for unproductive detail.

As an example of how works may be grouped in this way, please refer to the second sample essay (pp. 126–29). There, four works are in-