

Assignment Guide: The Compare/Contrast Essay

Assignment Prompt

For this assignment, you will be writing a [compare/contrast](#) essay—an [exploratory](#) piece of writing in which you attempt to show readers how two topics are similar, different, or a combination of the two: both similar and different. Whether you [focus](#) exclusively on comparing, exclusively on contrasting, or a mix of both, is totally up to you. However, regardless of which approach you decide to take, you will want to include a strong [thesis/claim statement](#), at least three effective [supporting points](#), and a streamlined [point-by-point organizational strategy](#).

Assignment-Specific Requirements:

Length: This assignment should be at least 750 words.

Thesis: Underline your [thesis statement](#) or the main [claim](#) of your essay.

Sources Needed: Two reliable and [credible sources](#) are required for this assignment. Be sure to use [MLA guidelines](#) for all in-text and [Works Cited](#) citations.

While we encourage you to acquire sources from Gale’s Opposing Viewpoints, you may access credible, [scholarly sources](#) from other resources. Tertiary sources, such as online encyclopedias, dictionaries and Wikipedia, are not [scholarly sources](#), and should not be cited within your work; however, they may offer helpful foundational information as you develop your understanding of an issue. (For more information, please review Berkley University’s resource on scholarly and popular sources: “[Evaluating Resources](#).”)

Page Formatting: See Appendix C - Formatting and Submitting Your Work

MLA Requirements: See Formatting your Essay: [MLA 8th Edition](#)

Rhetorical Mode

[Compare/contrast](#) essays are both creative and [analytical](#) in nature. They are typically more formal than a personal narrative in the sense that they are written from a [third-person](#) perspective, where a writer is not injecting their own opinion directly using “I” or “me” [language](#).

To prove points—[compare/contrast](#) essays rely on [researched evidence](#), and not personal opinion or experience, per se. When you choose two topics, you will have numerous options for comparing and contrasting them—much more than you can actually use in a single paper.

Therefore, you will need to decide what elements are worth comparing and contrasting, and why. This is the seek and discover part of the essay, but also the creative part. For example, another writer may choose the same two topics as you, but their essay may rest entirely on **thesis** and **supporting points**. When you limit your **supporting points** to those points you think you can prove most effectively, you are maximizing your creative and **analytical** writing abilities.

Rhetorical Considerations

Purpose:

Remember that this is an **exploratory** paper: The piece of writing should show readers, through the inclusion of careful detail and specifics, and strong **supporting points**, how your two topics are similar, different, or a combination of the two: similar and different.

Audience:

The **compare/contrast** essay is written for someone else—either a single **reader** or a community of readers. When choosing the points you want to use to show readers that your topics are similar, different, or a combination of the two, you should keep this **audience** in mind, making sure that you are choosing the most effective points possible to show how your two topics are similar or different.

In this instance, you are writing to show readers that your two topics are similar, different, or a combination of the two (similar and different). Keep this **audience** in mind by emphasizing the **compare/contrast claims** throughout the essay.

Form:

This is a formal writing project, written in **third-person**, relying on strong **organizational strategies**, integrating **researched evidence**, and following **MLA** formatting guidelines.

Six Features of a Compare and Contrast Essay

1. **Compare/Contrast Thesis:** Contains a strong and succinct **thesis/claim statement** that outlines whether the two topics are similar, different, or a combination of the two, and at least three **supporting points** that can boost that **claim**. A sample **compare/contrast thesis** might look like this:

Although curriculum A and curriculum B are similar in their student success goals, they are very different when it comes to their structure, topics, and scoring.

2. **Transitions:** Utilizes **transitional** words and phrases that help the **audience** (or **reader**) move more easily from idea to idea, sentence to sentence, and paragraph to paragraph.

1. *Note—**transitions** do not only occur in topic sentences but throughout the essay. When you are moving from one idea to the next, whether between two sentences or between two paragraphs, you will want to include **language** that can help bridge your ideas (and sentences/paragraphs). Some examples might be “in addition to,” “next.”

3. **Compare/Contrast Signals:** In addition to more typical **transitional** words and phrases, this essay should also include **compare/contrast** specific signals, emphasizing for readers how and why your topics are alike or different. Here are some example:
 1. similar: in addition, by comparison, similarly
 2. different: however, in **contrast**, differing from

4. **Point-by-Point Organizational Strategy:** The essay should follow the point-by-point approach to showcase the use of **transitions**, **synthesize** your own **supporting points** with **researched evidence**, and build a fully developed essay with an **introduction**, several body paragraphs, and a **conclusion**. For this kind of **organization**, you will create a **topic sentence** for each **body paragraph** that outlines a **compare/contrast** point regarding both topics and use the **body paragraph** to show readers how your two topics are similar, different, or similar and different.

5. **Reliable and Credible Sources:** The essay should integrate at least two reliable and **credible sources** (also known as “**scholarly sources**”) to help prove the **compare/contrast claims** to readers and to boost or substantiate the **supporting points** that you have created for your two topics.

Proofreading and Revising: As with any writing project, the final draft of this essay should be carefully reviewed for clarity and correctness. This includes checking **word choice**, **sentence structure**, **organization**, **transitions/coherence**, and **MLA** formatting.

Choosing a Topic for Your **Compare/Contrast** Essay

Selecting the right topic is an important step in ensuring your success in writing a **Compare/Contrast essay. You'll want to choose a topic that has the following features:**

- Of interest to you
- Relevant
- Current
- Debatable

- Well-researched
- [Narrow](#) in scope
- Academic or “scholarly” in nature

Topics to avoid, as they are either too complex to [compare](#) and/or [contrast](#) in a single essay, or not considered appropriate for an academic or scholarly argument, are as follows:

For/against . . .

- The death penalty
- Euthanasia or self-assisted death
- Abortion
- The (il)legalization of drugs (e.g. marijuana)
- Religion or religious readings (e.g. existence of a higher order/being, or life after death)
- Gun rights/rules
- Global warming

Please do not select one of the above topics, as your essay may be returned without grading, and you will be asked to rewrite it.

Need assignment ideas?

Take a look at this valuable resource from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Writing Center: [Topic Ideas](#)