

# **Compare & Contrast**

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## Compare and Contrast Essay

*The phrase “compare and contrast” can be the cause of some confusion. To understand the purpose of this type of essay, one must understand what the phrase “compare and contrast” means. This can be a problem; “Compare” implies placing two objects side-by-side and looking at their similarities and differences. When one “contrasts” two items, he or she finds differences. It seems the term “comparison” is sufficient in describing this type of essay.*

### The comparison essay

If comparing two works, be sure to read both texts several times. Pick out similarities in societal, familial, and/or personal relationships. Chart these:

#### Similarities

##### Of Human Bondage

Philip loses his mother at an early age, which in turn forces him to replace her figure with that of the slatternly waitress Mildred.

Philip is sexually obsessed with Mildred but never consummates the relationship because of Mildred’s reluctance to love him because of his clubbed foot.

##### Wuthering Heights

Heathcliff never knows his real mother, so he substitutes Catherine for her.

Catherine never consummates the relationship with Heathcliff because of his lack of education; he doesn’t exemplify the qualities of a gentlemen as does Edgar Linton.

#### Differences

##### Of Human Bondage

Philip’s love diminishes after time. His engagement to Sally marks the end of his obsession with Mildred. He is finally free of the bondage.

##### Wuthering Heights

Heathcliff is never able to break free from his obsession with Catherine. He destroys the lives of those who keep them from being together and then dies with the satisfaction of knowing that he will be buried beside her.

**Sample thesis for this paper:** Philip Carey in Of Human Bondage and Heathcliff in Wuthering Heights both struggle to find the identity of their absent mothers through a particular relationship; while Philip ultimately overcomes his obsession with Mildred and lives a peaceful life, Heathcliff destroys all those around him as revenge for the relationship taken from him.

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When you **compare** things, you show their **similarities**; when you **contrast** things, you show their **differences**.

We can really understand only those things that are familiar to us or similar to things we already understand, so comparing and contrasting the unfamiliar with the familiar is one of the most important techniques for writing. You can, and probably do, use comparison and contrast to describe things, to define things, to analyze things, to make an argument -- to do, in fact, almost any kind of writing.

When they are comparing and contrasting, for example, two ideas, like corsets and footbinding, most writers structure their essays one of four ways.

1. First compare, then contrast (or vice versa).
2. First do one idea, then do the other.
3. Write only about the comparable and contrastable elements of each idea.
4. Only compare or only contrast.

**1. First compare, then contrast (or vice versa).**

Writers using a comparison/contrast structure might begin by discussing the ways in which corsets are similar to footbinding, then they move to a description of the ways in which the two ideas are different. This method is probably the one used most commonly.

I.	introduction
II.	Corsets and footbinding are similar.
III.	Corsets and footbinding are different.
IV.	conclusion

A quick outline comparing and then contrasting corsets and footbinding shows one way that such a paper might be structured.

This structure focuses on the comparison and contrast instead of on the two ideas (e.g., corsetry and footbinding) being compared and contrasted.

Clearly, the sequence is important. If you begin with the comparison, then the contrast will get emphasis - the logical movement is from thinking about similarities to thinking about differences. If you begin by contrasting the ideas (and then move toward a comparison), the similarities get emphasis.

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## 2. **First do one idea, then do the other.**

Writers might compare and contrast ideas by treating one idea thoroughly before taking up the second one. This method is probably the one most students try first, but many evolve past it into something more flexible.

introduction
similarities (or differences)
differences (or similarities)
conclusion

A quick outline that treats first corsets and then footbinding shows one way that such a paper might be structured.

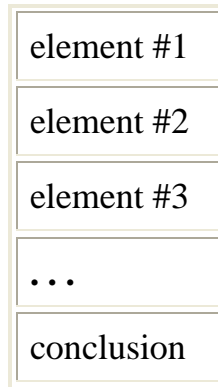
A structure like this one seems more focused on the ideas being compared and contrasted than on the comparison and contrast itself. The similarities and differences between the ideas do not begin to emerge until the writer gets to the second idea. It is as if the writer is comparing and contrasting (for example) footbinding to corsetry, instead of corsetry and footbinding to each other.

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## 3. **Write only about the comparable and contrastable elements of each idea.**

Writers might compare and contrast ideas by taking important specific elements and looking at their similarities and differences. This method requires real control over your subject.

introduction
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A quick outline that compares and contrasts only relevant aspects of corsets and footbinding shows one way that such a paper might be structured.

A comparison/contrast essay like this one would probably focus only on those elements of the ideas that are explicitly comparable or contrasting.

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#### 4. **Only compare or only contrast.**

It is always possible, of course, to write an essay that treats only the similarities or differences between ideas.

- Writers who **only compare** two ideas sometimes briefly mention the contrast in the introduction and then move on so that they don't lead readers to think they can't make relevant distinctions.
- Writers who **only contrast** ideas sometimes briefly summarize similarities in the conclusion so they don't leave the impression that they are thinking in opposites.

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### **Comparison/contrast is useful for more than an essay topic.**

Many teachers assign topics that ask writers to write an essay comparing and contrasting two or more ideas, but besides its value in organizing an essay, comparison/contrast is also useful as a technique

- to structure a paragraph
- to work within other techniques or modes
  - to define a complex idea (by comparing to something similar and contrasting it with its opposite)
  - to think about one thing in terms of another (like the present in terms of the past or the past in terms of the future or humans in terms of primates)

- to make an argument, first describing what people shouldn't do and then ending - with a bang! - with what they should.

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### Other, related concepts to think about and places to look

Analogical and metaphorical language: like and as

Using lists in your writing: parallelism

An Overview of the Writing Process

Developing an Introduction

Conclusions

Essay Organization: The Flow Chart Approach

Paragraph Development

When Do I Begin a New Paragraph

Cohesion

Brainstorming

Focused Freewriting

Invention Questions for Argument and Persuasion

Invention Questions for Writing about Cause and Effect

Invention Questions for Comparing and Contrasting

The various rhetorical modes and types of writing

Narrative

Description

Definition

Process Description

Reaction Papers

<http://www.westga.edu>

<http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/acadwrite/comparcontrast.html>

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Abstract of a report or an article

Summary of an article or a book

Literary Essay

Return to the discussion of how comparison and contrast can be used beyond structure for an essay.

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### **A quick outline of how a paper comparing and then contrasting corsets and footbinding might look.**

1. Introduction
2. Corsets and footbinding are similar
  - Both practiced in the far past, through the 19th century, and into the 20th.
  - Both restrict women's movement and impair health.
  - Both practiced by women of all classes, though most people imagine tight-lacing and footbinding were limited to the upper class.
  - To use Veblen's argument, both enhance man's value in the culture to be responsible for women who were too delicate to work.
  - Both practiced by women on women. Women laced corsets; women bound feet.
3. Corsets and footbinding are different
  - Chinese culture is radically different from that of western Europe and America.
  - Every Chinese woman so bound was deformed for life; only most extreme cases of tight-lacing did permanent damage.
  - Corsets trivialized by everybody since the end of the dress reform movement.
4. Conclusion

Return to the discussion of comparison/contrast essays.

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### **A quick outline of how a paper treating one topic and then the other might look.**

1. Introduction
2. Corsetry
  - Practiced in Sumaria, Crete, millennia ago; focus in Western world.
  - Corsetry not exactly the same as tight-lacing.
  - Effects on health: Tight-lacing v stays.
  - Henri II's queen: 15-inch waist with the help of the King's armorer.
  - Dress Reform movement.

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- 1880s and 1890s, when women were looking at the possibilities of real contributions to the political debate.
  - 3. Footbinding
    - Earliest references.
    - Survival rates and the effects on health.
    - Our misconceptions about class -- women plowing fields in mud up to their ankles.
    - Any girl whose female relatives thought she might be able to marry up would bind her feet.
    - Simone de Beauvoir saw some; Life magazine's photos.
    - When the government made it illegal. Also, how women whose feet had been bound couldn't really unbind.
  - 4. Conclusion
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## **A quick outline of how a paper treating only comparable and contrasting elements might look.**

1. Introduction
  2. Restrictions on women's movements.
  3. Effects on women's health.
  4. Economic and cultural value of a helpless female to a powerful male.
  5. Women's contributions to their own weakening.
  6. Cultural movements against tight-lacing and footbinding.
  7. Socio-economic class and tight-lacing and footbinding.
  8. Lasting into 20th century.
  9. Eastern and western cultures.
  10. Extreme cases vs. most women.
  11. Conclusion
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Last update: 28 September 1997