

## Comparison and Contrast

Although comparison and contrast are seldom used entirely by themselves (often being combined with other rhetorical patterns in the same essay), you have used them yourself while others have used them to make things clear to you. When you were a child, you might have asked your father what a “giraffe” was. His response might have been something like this: “It is an animal that looks something like a horse, except that it has long legs and a very long neck—much longer than a horse’s neck. Its color is much like a leopard’s, yellow with black spots, but the giraffe’s spots are larger and he has fewer of them than a leopard has. A giraffe has a black tongue, too— very different from cats and dogs and most other animals.” Your father answered your question by comparing and contrasting the giraffe’s size, legs, neck, color, and tongue with those of other animals. Because the giraffe is an animal, the best things to compare it with are other animals, members of the same classification. It would be possible to compare the giraffe to a Chevrolet (the giraffe is taller, not a machine, and a different color; it lacks bucket seats and a vinyl roof) or to a telephone pole (the giraffe is not as tall, can move around better, and does/does not smell better), but the comparisons and contrasts possible would not be as useful as the animal comparisons are in giving a child an idea of what a giraffe is. In general, then, we usually compare and contrast things in a group or class defined by our interest, things that have important similarities as well as differences.

There are three reasons for developing an essay by comparison and contrast. The first is that we might want to describe or define one item, and we do so by relating it to another item with which our reader is familiar. If you wanted to tell your reader how the Texas Senate operates, you might do it by comparing and contrasting the Texas Senate with the United States Senate. You assume that your reader knows something about the U.S. Senate and that he will be able to make the correct associations with the Texas Senate. Obviously, it is important to choose one item with which your reader is already familiar. Comparing the Texas Senate to England’s Parliament will not do much good if your reader has no idea how that Parliament operates.

The second reason for developing an essay by comparison and contrast is to tell your reader something about both of the subjects by discussing them in relation to some general principle. The general principle should be applicable in both and familiar to the reader. So you might compare and contrast the Texas Senate and England’s Parliament, about neither of which your reader knows anything, by relating them to principles of democratic government that your reader understands. You might begin by showing that both the Texas Senate and England’s Parliament use forms of representative government. The people elect representatives to these legislative bodies, and the elected legislators make laws on behalf of the electorate. Here you have compared the Texas Senate and England’s Parliament in relation to representative government. Because our reader understands how representative government works (the people elect representatives to the legislative body), he now knows something about the Texas Senate and England’s Parliament.

Finally, you may compare and contrast several things with which the reader is already familiar in order to help him understand some general principles or ideas with which he is not familiar. If you want your reader to understand what government is, you might compare and contrast

American democracy, British parliamentary rule, and the emerging Russian system to show what they have in common. If you want your reader to get an idea of what “Social Science” is, you can compare and contrast the academic disciplines of psychology, history, and economics to show what they have in common. In these cases you would be using comparison and contrast to move from your examples with which the reader is already familiar (American democracy, psychology) to a general description of the classes under which your examples belong (government, social science) about which your reader knows very little or nothing.

### Strategy

Once you decide to use comparison and contrast, there are two basic ways of organizing your essay. You can present one item fully and then discuss the other, called the block method, or you can present a part of one item, then a part of the other, and so on until both are fully demonstrated, which is called the alternating method.

### *Block Pattern*

The first method, sometimes called the block pattern, is usually most appropriate when the elements of comparison and contrast are rather simple, broad, and obvious. The assumption the writer makes when presenting the whole of one subject and then the whole of the other is that his reader will be able to remember the first subject while reading the comparisons and contrasts of the second. Since a complex or extended comparison/contrast would probably be difficult for the reader to remember, we normally use the first method for simple subjects. Here is a short example of the first method of organization; observe the organization of the essay as you read.

---

## THE SCIENTIST AND THE HUMANIST

One of the best places for a people watcher to practice his observations is on any college campus. Close examination of the large flocks of students will soon lead the dedicated observer to the conclusion that there are at least two easily identifiable subgroups among the student population. These kinds have been classified as *studens scientiae* (scientists) and *studens humani* (humanists); they are identifiable by their appearance, natural habitats, and conversations.

The scientist can be recognized by his appearance, his general residence away from home, and his customary language. The male of the species is characterized by a bow tie (usually polka dotted), and numerous pens and mechanical pencils in a plastic case protruding from his pants pocket. It is extremely unusual, but not impossible, to observe facial hair on the male. Both male and female are generally drab and colorless in appearance, the male tending to white shirts and brown polyester slacks, while the female wears severely tailored beige tweed suits and little or no makeup. She wears her hair tied neatly in a bun and often exhibits yellow nitric acid stains on the fingers of the right hand. In addition, the normal habitat of the scientist is the laboratory or computer center, where he drinks coffee from a beaker and turns dials. When forced to move from these sites by hunger, examination, or fire, scientists travel in small groups at a very rapid pace, as if hurrying to a meeting or from an explosion. If the observer can get close enough to hear their conversation, he will hear repeated utterances of “integer, integer.” When excited or animated, the species emits a shrill repeated cry of “valence,” interspersed with numerical and alphabetical designations on such recitations as “approximating the irrational zeros of polynomial functions.” When away from their laboratory or computer sites, scientists become nervous and irritable, refusing to approach other species.

A very different picture is evident when the humanist is scrutinized. He is much more brightly

## Comparison and Contrast

colored, though usually less neatly groomed. Males tend to blue jeans, black Metallica T-shirts, and tennis shoes. The females are difficult to distinguish from the males of the species, except that long facial hair is more often characteristic of the male while the female may have two or three more pierced earrings in each ear. Hair length for both male and female is uniformly long, and in either case it may hide the face completely or be shaved on one side of the head. The habitat and habits of the humanist, too, present a striking contrast with those of the scientist. The humanist avoids the laboratory and computer sites of the scientist, congregating instead on grassy knolls in the front of the campus or beneath campus trees. Humanists move as little as possible and never in accelerated fashion. Their favorite position is to lie fully extended and apparently asleep in the sun. The observer should recognize approaching humanists fairly easily since they are often dozing beneath earphones, or engaged in desultory conversations on the lawn or in the courtyard. Their normal call when at rest is a plaintive “Kierkegaard, Kierkegaard,” with an occasional variation of “Existential Phenomenology.” When aroused or excited, though, humanists can be quite dangerous. They collect quickly into large groups; their call changes to a shrill “Save the whales,” and their behavior is marked by chanting and the waving of protest signs.

We can see, then, a clear profile of each dominant type and how each differs in several ways. Although there are other species of student life on the campus, the scientists and humanists form two of the most colorful, distinctive, and intriguing subjects for the interested observer. These two types of appearances, natural habitats, and conversations mark these groups as two very distinctive classes of student life.

The author of this essay wanted to acquaint his reader with two types of college students. He illustrated one of these types, which he calls “scientists,” with examples of their appearance, habits, and conversations. Then, assuming that the reader will be able to remember the description of the scientists, he compares and contrasts them with another group, which he calls humanists. He describes this group, giving examples of their appearance, habits, and conversations that point up the differences between the scientists and humanists.

### ***Alternating Pattern***

In the second basic organizational method, the alternating pattern, the writer structures his essay differently. He discusses one characteristic of the first subject and then a corresponding characteristic of the second subject. He continues alternating the two subjects until the comparison/contrast is complete and both subjects are fully revealed. This pattern is better than the block pattern for long, complex comparison/contrast essays where the subjects are related at a number of points or where the comparisons and contrasts require extensive explanation. The writer decides on the alternating pattern when use of the block pattern would make it too difficult for his reader to remember the details of the first description while reading the second. In the example of the alternating pattern that follows, we will use the same humanist-scientist subject matter as was used in the previous example. You have seen the essay structure according to the block pattern; now read the following portion of an essay using the alternating pattern and notice the structural differences.

---

## THE SCIENTIST AND THE HUMANIST

One of the best places for a people watcher to practice his observations is on any college campus. Close examination of the large flocks of students will soon lead the dedicated observer to the conclusion that there are at least two easily identifiable subgroups among the student population. These kinds have been classified as *studens scientiae* (scientists) and *studens humani*

(humanists), distinctive for their appearance, natural habitats, and conversations. The two types are easily discernible from their appearance alone.

The scientist can be recognized by his appearance and grooming habits. The male of the species is characterized by a bow tie (usually polka dotted), numerous pens and mechanical pencils in a plastic folder in his shirt pocket, and a pocket calculator in a leather case protruding from his pants pocket. It is extremely unusual, but not impossible, to observe facial hair on the male. Both male and female are generally drab and colorless in appearance, the male tending to white shirts and brown polyester slacks, while she wears her hair tied neatly in a bun and often exhibits yellow nitric acid stains on the fingers of the right hand. The humanist, by contrast, is much more interestingly attired, though usually less neatly groomed. The males tend to blue jeans, black Metallica T-shirts, and tennis shoes, combat boots, or Birkenstock sandals. The females are difficult to distinguish from the males of the species, except that long facial hair is more often characteristic of the male, while the female exhibits three or more pierced earrings on each ear. Hair length for both male and female is uniformly long, and, in either case, it may hide the face completely or be shaved on one side of the head. The two types are differentiated with little difficulty at forty paces.

The contrast in appearance extends to the normal habits and habitats of the two species as well. etc., etc.

## Organization

These two essays have a number of things in common. The first (introductory) paragraphs are the same; it is only when they get midway into the second paragraph (first body paragraph) that the essays begin to vary. Both contrast the humanist and the scientist, and both use a mock-scientific tone, implying that the students are species of animals or birds. The differences between the two are organizational and can be represented in outline form. An outline of the first essay, using the block pattern, looks like this:

Introduction (*with thesis statement*)

Body

- I. The Scientist
  - A. Appearance
  - B. Habits and Habitats
  - C. Conversations
- II. The Humanist
  - A. Appearance
  - B. Habits and Habitats
  - C. Conversations Conclusion

The second essay (or portion of it) uses the alternating pattern and looks like this in outline form:

Introduction (*with thesis statement*) Body

- I. Appearance (*Only this paragraph appears in the example above.*)
  - A. The Scientist
  - B. The Humanist
- II. Habits and Habitats
  - A. The Scientist
  - B. The Humanist

## Comparison and Contrast

### III. Conversations

#### A. The Scientist

#### B. The Humanist Conclusion

As is obvious from these two outlines, the first essay treats the scientist first (I, A & B), and then the humanist (II, A & B). The second essay treats both the scientist and the humanist in turn, first according to appearance (I), then according to habits and habitats (II), and then according to conversations of both (III).

While the two organizational patterns so far identified are the basic and usual ones for an essay of comparison and contrast, it is possible to combine the two if the writer feels that would make his essay clearer or better. In this combined pattern the first subject is presented fully, just as in the sample essay illustrating the block pattern. Then in the second part of the essay the reader is referred, point by point, to the first subject. The writer provides a brief summary of the relevant part of the full presentation and then compares and contrasts the relevant part of the second subject to it. Either of the two basic patterns or the combined pattern should be chosen based on the determination of which is most suitable for the subject, the purpose, and the audience.

The block method, remember, is generally most suitable for a fairly simple and straightforward comparison/contrast, while the alternating pattern works better for complex and lengthy subject matter. The combined method, too, is generally used for a more difficult or extended comparison and contrast than the block pattern—one in which it will be useful to be able to refer the reader, point by point, back to the full description in the first section. While the patterns are presented here as expository, they may be used to structure your argument in a persuasive essay, where rather than merely presenting the alternatives informatively, you must make choices. You will take a stand and use comparison and contrast as your major method of development.

### **Checklist for Comparison/Contrast Essay**

Does your essay

1. use the appropriate pattern of comparison/contrast for your subject matter, audience, and purpose?
2. include topic sentences that contain references to both items if you have chosen the alternating pattern?
3. contain a thesis statement that indicates your purpose (i.e., comparing or contrasting or both), that mentions both items to be discussed, that makes clear the point you intend to show in the essay?
4. offer the best logical order for the purpose you want to achieve?
5. avoid commonplace comparisons and contrasts?
6. Did you edit your paper carefully, checking for major grammatical and spelling errors?