

The Comparative Essay

What is a comparative essay?

A comparative essay asks that you compare at least two (possibly more) items. These items will differ depending on the assignment. You might be asked to compare

- positions on an issue (e.g., responses to midwifery in Canada and the United States)
- theories (e.g., capitalism and communism)
- figures (e.g., GDP in the United States and Britain)
- texts (e.g., Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*)
- events (e.g., the Great Depression and the global financial crisis of 2008–9)

Although the assignment may say “compare,” the assumption is that you will consider both the similarities and differences; in other words, you will compare and contrast.

Make sure you know the basis for comparison

The assignment sheet may say exactly what you need to compare, or it may ask you to come up with a basis for comparison yourself.

- **Provided by the essay question:** The essay question may ask that you consider the figure of the gentleman in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* and Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. The basis for comparison will be the figure of the gentleman.
- **Developed by you:** The question may simply ask that you compare the two novels. If so, you will need to develop a basis for comparison, that is, a theme, concern, or device common to both works from which you can draw similarities and differences.

Develop a list of similarities and differences

Once you know your basis for comparison, think critically about the similarities and differences between the items you are comparing, and compile a list of them.

For example, you might decide that in *Great Expectations*, being a true gentleman is not a matter of manners or position but morality, whereas in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, being a true gentleman is not about luxury and self-indulgence but hard work and productivity.

The list you have generated is not yet your outline for the essay, but it should provide you with enough similarities and differences to construct an initial plan.

Develop a thesis based on the relative weight of similarities and differences

Once you have listed similarities and differences, decide whether the similarities on the whole outweigh the differences or vice versa. Create a thesis statement that reflects their relative weights. A more complex thesis will usually include both similarities and differences. Here are examples of the two main cases:

1. Differences outweigh similarities:

While Callaghan's “All the Years of Her Life” and Mistry's “Of White Hairs and Cricket” both follow the conventions of the coming-of-age narrative, Callaghan's story adheres more closely to these conventions by allowing its central protagonist to mature. In Mistry's story, by contrast, no real growth occurs.

2. Similarities outweigh differences:

Although Darwin and Lamarck came to different conclusions about whether acquired traits can be inherited, they shared the key distinction of recognizing that species evolve over time.

Come up with a structure for your essay

1. Alternating method: Point-by-point pattern

In the alternating method, you find related points common to your central subjects A and B, and alternate between A and B on the basis of these points (ABABAB ...). For instance, a

comparative essay on the French and Russian revolutions might examine how both revolutions either encouraged or thwarted innovation in terms of new technology, military strategy, and the administrative system.

A	Paragraph 1 in body	new technology and the French Revolution
B	Paragraph 2 in body	new technology and the Russian Revolution
A	Paragraph 3 in body	military strategy and the French Revolution
B	Paragraph 4 in body	military strategy and the Russian Revolution
A	Paragraph 5 in body	administrative system and the French Revolution
B	Paragraph 6 in body	administrative system and the Russian Revolution

Note that the French and Russian revolutions (A and B) may be dissimilar rather than similar in the way they affected innovation in any of the three areas of technology, military strategy, and administration. To use the alternating method, you just need to have something noteworthy to say about both A and B in each area. Finally, you may certainly include more than three pairs of alternating points: allow the subject matter to determine the number of points you choose to develop in the body of your essay.

When do I use the alternating method?

Professors often like the alternating system because it generally does a better job of highlighting similarities and differences by juxtaposing your points about A and B. It also tends to produce a more tightly integrated and analytical paper. Consider the alternating method if you are able to identify clearly related points between A and B. Otherwise, if you attempt to impose the alternating method, you will probably find it counterproductive.

2. Block method: Subject-by-subject pattern

In the block method (AB), you discuss all of A, then all of B. For example, a comparative essay using the block method on the French and Russian revolutions would address the French Revolution in the first half of the essay and the Russian Revolution in the second half. If you choose the block method, however, do not simply append two disconnected essays to an introductory thesis. The B block, or second half of your essay, should refer to the A block, or first half, and make clear points of comparison whenever comparisons are relevant. (“Unlike A, B . . .” or “Like A, B . . .”) This technique will allow for a higher level of critical engagement, continuity, and cohesion.

A	Paragraphs 1–3 in body	How the French Revolution encouraged or thwarted innovation
B	Paragraphs 4–6 in body	How the Russian Revolution encouraged or thwarted innovation

When do I use the block method?

The block method is particularly useful in the following cases:

- You are unable to find points about A and B that are closely related to each other.
- Your ideas about B build upon or extend your ideas about A.
- You are comparing three or more subjects as opposed to the traditional two.