

**AP Austin Peay**  
State University  
**APSU Writing Center**  
Compare/Contrast Essay

**Compare/Contrast Essay**

Resource: *The LB Brief Handbook*, 5th edition


- A compare and contrast essay has two parts: compare and contrast.
  - **Compare** shows how things, persons, places, etc. **are same.**
  - **Contrast** shows how things, persons, places, etc. **are different.**
  
- By assigning such essays, your instructors are encouraging you to do the following:
  - Make connections between texts or ideas
  - Engage in critical thinking
  - Go beyond mere description or summary to generate interesting analysis
  
- When you reflect on similarities and differences, you gain a deeper understanding of the following:
  - The items you are comparing
  - Their relationship to each other
  - What is most important about them?

**Discovering similarities and differences:**

- **Outline:** Before beginning the essay, use a chart, table, or bubble map to help brainstorm. Refer to the following chart as an example:

Qualities of subject "A"	Common Quality	Qualities of subject "B"
Quality # 1		Quality # 1
Quality # 2		Quality # 2
Quality # 3		Quality # 3

Next, **compare all these qualities to each other.** You should find some similar and dissimilar qualities that you can compare and contrast. After you have completed your list of differences and similarities, you should evaluate which of them are more interesting and important for your essay. Once all major points of comparison/contrast have been listed, one should concentrate on the **main aim of the comparison/contrast** assignment. At this stage of the writing process, you should have a **clear idea of the purpose of this essay.** Decide which **similarities and differences to focus on,** and organize your paper so that it will be clear and effective.

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**Organizing your paper:**

- There are many different ways to organize a comparison/contrast essay. Here are two:
- **Subject-by-subject:**
  - **Structure:** discuss one subject, then discuss the other. Begin by saying everything you have to say about the first subject you are discussing, then move on and make all the points you want to make about the second subject (and after that, the third, and so on, if you're comparing/contrasting more than two things).
  - If the paper is short, you might be able to fit all of your points about each item into a single paragraph, but it's more likely that you'd have several paragraphs per item.
  - Using our pizza place comparison/contrast as an example, after the introduction, you might have a paragraph about the ingredients available at Pepper's, a paragraph about its location, and a paragraph about its ambience. Then you'd have three similar paragraphs about Amante, followed by your conclusion. The danger of this subject-by-subject organization is that **your paper will simply be a list of points:** a certain number of points about one subject, then a certain number of points about another.
  - This is usually not what college instructors are looking for in a paper—generally they want you to compare or contrast two or more things very directly, rather than just listing the traits the things have and leaving it up to the reader to reflect on how those traits are similar or different and why those similarities or differences matter
  - Thus, if you use the subject-by-subject form, you will probably need to have a very strong, analytical thesis and at least one body paragraph that ties all of your different points together.
- **Point-by-point:**
  - **Structure:** two subjects are discussed side by side. Rather than addressing things one subject at a time, you may wish to talk about one point of comparison at a time.
  - There are two main ways this might play out, depending on how much you have to say about each of the things you are comparing. If you have just a little, you might, in a single paragraph, discuss how a certain point of comparison/contrast relates to all the items you are discussing.



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- For example, I might describe, in one paragraph, what the prices are like at both Pepper's and Amante. In the next paragraph, I might compare the ingredients available. In a third, I might contrast the atmospheres of the two restaurants. If I had a bit more to say about the items I was comparing/contrasting, I might devote a whole paragraph to how each point relates to each item. For example, I might have a whole paragraph about the clientele at Pepper's, followed by a whole paragraph about the clientele at Amante; then I would move on and do two more paragraphs discussing my next point of comparison/contrast—like the ingredients available at each restaurant. There are no hard and fast rules about organizing a comparison/contrast paper, of course. Just be sure that your reader can easily tell what's going on! Be aware, too, of the placement of your different points. If you are writing a comparison/contrast in service of an argument, keep in mind that the last point you make is the one you are leaving your reader with. For example, if I am trying to argue that Amante is better than Pepper's, I should end with a contrast that leaves Amante sounding good, rather than with a point of comparison that I have to admit makes Pepper's look better.
- **Essay format of your paper:**
  - Follow the compare and contrast essay format given below. Put all the discovered information in accordance with the compare and contrast essay format.
- **Thesis statement:**
  - Develop a thesis that goes beyond "Thing A and Thing B are similar in many ways but different in others."
  - The thesis of your comparison/contrast paper is very important: it can help you create a focused argument and give your reader a road map so she/he doesn't get lost in the sea of points you are about to make. As in any paper, you will want to replace vague reports of your general topic with something more detailed and specific.
  - **For example**, you might say, "Pepper's and Amante have similar prices and ingredients, but their atmospheres and willingness to deliver set them apart." Be careful, though—although this thesis is fairly specific and does propose a simple argument (that atmosphere and delivery make the two pizza places different), your instructor will often be looking for **a bit more analysis**. In this case, the obvious question is "**So what?** Why should anyone care that Pepper's and Amante are different in this way?" One might also wonder why the writer chose those two particular pizza places to compare—why not Papa John's, Dominos, or Pizza Hut? Again, thinking about the context the class provides may help you answer such questions and make a stronger argument. Here's a revision of the thesis mentioned earlier:
  - Pepper's and Amante both offer a greater variety of ingredients than other Chapel Hill/Carrboro pizza places (and than any of the national chains), but the funky, lively atmosphere at Pepper's makes it a better place to give visiting friends and family a taste of local culture.



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- **Cue words and other tips:**
  - To help your reader keep track of where you are in the comparison/contrast, you'll want to be sure that your transitions and topic sentences are especially strong.
  - Your thesis should already have given the reader an idea of the points you'll be making and the organization you'll be using, but you can help her/him out with some extra cues.
  - Guess where those cues will come? Answer: from the use of **transitional words and phrases**.
  - The following words may also be helpful to you in signaling your intentions: like, similar to, also, unlike, similarly, in the same way, likewise, again, compared to, in contrast, in like manner, contrasted with, on the contrary, however, although, yet, even though, still, but, nevertheless, conversely, at the same time, regardless, despite, while, on the one hand, on the other hand.
- **Topic sentences** are generally the first sentence of every paragraph in the body of the paper. While the thesis sentence tells the main idea of the overall paper, the topic sentence alerts the reader of the main idea of that particular paragraph. For example, you might have a **topic sentence** like one of these:
  - Compared to Pepper's, Amante is quiet.
  - Like Amante, Pepper's offers fresh garlic as a topping.
  - Despite their different locations (downtown Chapel Hill and downtown Carrboro), Pepper's and Amante are both fairly easy to find.