

THEMES OF COMPARISON—CONTRAST AND EXTENDED COMPARISON—CONTRAST

Learning By Seeing Things Together

A comparison—contrast theme is used to compare and contrast different authors, two or more works by the same author, different drafts of the same work, or characters, incidents, techniques, and ideas within the same work or in different works. The virtue of comparison—contrast is that it enables the study of works in perspective. No matter what works you consider together, the method helps you isolate and highlight individual characteristics, for the quickest way to get at the essence of one thing is to compare it with another. Similarities are brought out by comparison, and differences are shown by contrast. In other words, you can enhance your understanding of what a thing *is* by using comparison—contrast to determine what it is *not*.

For example, our understanding of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 30, “When to the Sessions of Sweet Silent Thought” (p. 125), may be enhanced if we compare it with Christina Rossetti’s poem “Echo” (p. 206). Both poems treat personal recollections of past experiences, told by a speaker to a listener who is not intended to be the reader. They also both refer to persons, now dead, with whom the speakers were closely involved.

There are important differences, however. Shakespeare’s speaker numbers the dead persons as friends whom he laments generally, while Rossetti refers specifically to one person with whom the speaker was in love. Rossetti’s topic is the sorrow of dead love, the irrevocability of the past, and the present loneliness of the speaker. Shakespeare includes the references to dead friends as a way of accounting for present sorrows, but then his speaker turns to the present and asserts that thinking about the “dear friend” being addressed enables him to restore past “losses” and end all “sorrows.” In Rossetti’s poem, there is no reconciliation of past and present; instead the speaker focuses entirely upon the sadness of the present moment. Though both poems are retrospective, then, Shakespeare’s poem looks toward the present while Rossetti’s looks to the past.

While more could be said, this example shows how the comparison—contrast method enables us to identify leading similarities and distinguishing differences in both works. It is usually the rule that you may overcome difficulty with one work by comparing and contrasting it with another work on a comparable subject.

CLARIFY YOUR INTENTION

When planning a comparison—contrast theme, you should first decide on your goal, for you may use the method in a number of ways. One objective may be *the equal and mutual illumination of both (or more) works*. For example, an essay comparing Welty’s “A Worn Path” (pp. 322-28) with Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” (pp. 302-11) might be designed (1) to compare ideas, characters, or methods in these stories equally, without stressing or favoring either. But you might also wish (2) to emphasize “Young Goodman Brown,” and therefore you would use “A Worn Path” as material for highlighting Hawthorne’s work. In addition, you might use the comparison—contrast method (3) to show your liking of one work at the expense of another, or (4) to emphasize a method or idea that you think is especially noteworthy or appropriate.

A first task is therefore to decide what to emphasize. The first sample theme (pp. 170-72) gives “equal time” to both works being considered, without any claims for the superiority of either. Unless you wish to pursue a different rhetorical goal, this theme is a suitable model for most comparisons.

FIND COMMON GROUNDS FOR COMPARISON

Your second stage in prewriting for this theme is to select a common ground for discussion. It is pointless to compare dissimilar things, for the resulting conclusions will not have much value. Instead, find a common ground. Compare like with like: idea with idea, characterization with characterization, imagery with imagery, point of view with point of view, tone with tone, problem with problem. Nothing can be learned from a comparison of “Welty’s view of courage and Chekhov’s view of love,” but a comparison of “The relationship of love to stability and courage in Chekhov and Welty” suggests common ground, with the promise of important things to be learned through the examination of similarities and differences.

In seeking common ground, you will need to be inventive and creative. For instance, Maupassant’s “The Necklace” and Chekhov’s *The Bear* at first seem dissimilar. Yet a common ground can be found, such as “The treatment of Self-Deceit,” “The Effects of Chance on Human Affairs,” “The View of Women,” and so on. Although other works may seem even more dissimilar than these, it is usually possible to find a common ground for comparison and contrast. Much of your success with this theme depends on your finding a workable basis—a common denominator—for comparison.

METHODS OF COMPARISON

Let us assume that you have decided on your rhetorical purpose and on the basis of your comparison. You have done your reading, taken notes, and have a rough idea of what to say. The remaining problem is the treatment of your material. Here are two ways:

A common way is to make your points about one work and then about the other. Unfortunately, this method makes your paper seem like two big lumps. (“Work 1” takes up one half of your paper, and “work 2” takes up the other half.) Also, the method involves repetition because you must repeat many points when you treat the second subject.

A superior method therefore is to treat the major aspects of your main idea and to refer to the two (or more) works as they support your arguments. Thus you refer constantly to *both* works, sometimes within the same sentence, and remind your reader of the point of your discussion. There are reasons for the superiority of this method: (1) You do not repeat your points needlessly, for you document them as you raise them. (2) By constantly referring to the two works, you make your points without requiring a reader with a poor memory to reread previous sections.

As a model, here is a paragraph on “Natural References as a Basis of Comparison in Frost’s ‘Desert Places’ and Shakespeare’s Sonnet 73 [‘That Time of Year Thou Mayest in Me Behold’]” (pp. 350 and 339). The virtue of the paragraph is that it uses material from both poems

simultaneously (as nearly as the time sequence of sentences allows) as the substance for the development of the ideas:

[1] Both writers link their ideas to events occurring in the natural world. [2] Night as a parallel with death is common to both poems, with Frost speaking about it in his first line, and Shakespeare introducing it in his seventh. [3] Along with night, Frost emphasizes the onset of winter and snow as a time of death and desolation. [4] With this natural description, Frost also symbolically refers to empty, secret, dead places in the inner spirit—crannies of the soul where bleak winter snowfalls correspond to selfishness and indifference to others. [5] By contrast, Shakespeare uses the fall season, with the yellowing and dropping of leaves and also the flying away of birds, to stress the closeness of real death and therefore also the need to love fully during the time remaining. [6] Both poems therefore share a sense of gloom, because both present death as inevitable and final, just like the oncoming season of barrenness and waste. [7] Because Shakespeare's sonnet is addressed to a listener who is also a loved one, however, it is more outgoing than the more introspective poem of Frost. [8] Frost turns the snow, the night, and the emptiness of the universe inwardly in order to show the speaker's inner bleakness, and by extension, the bleakness of many human spirits. [9] Shakespeare instead uses the bleakness of seasons, night, and dying fires to state the need for loving "well." [10] The poems thus use common and similar references for different purposes and effects.

The paragraph links Shakespeare's references to nature with those of Frost. Five sentences speak of both authors together; three speak of Frost alone, and two of Shakespeare alone, but all the sentences are unified topically. This interweaving of references indicates that the writer has learned both poems well enough to think of them at the same time, and it also enables the writing to be more pointed and succinct than if the works were separately treated.

You can learn from this example: If you develop your theme by putting your two subjects constantly together, you will write economically and pointedly (not only for themes, but also for tests). Beyond that, if you digest the material as successfully as this method indicates, you demonstrate that you are fulfilling a major educational goal—the assimilation and *use* of material. Too often, because you learn things separately (in separate works and courses, at separate times), you tend also to compartmentalize them. Instead, should always try to relate them, to *synthesize* them. Comparison and contrast help in this process of putting together, of seeing things not as fragments but as parts of wholes.

AVOID THE "TENNIS-BALL" METHOD

As you make your comparison, do not confuse an interlocking method with a "tennis-ball" method, in which you bounce your subject back and forth constantly and repetitively, almost as though you were hitting observations back and forth over a net. The tennis-ball method is shown in the following example from a comparison of characters Mathilde (Maupassat's "The Necklace") and Miss Brill (Mansfield's "Miss Brill"):

Mathilde is a young married woman, while Miss Brill is single and getting older. Mathilde has at least some kind of social life, even though she doesn't have more than one friend, while Miss Brill leads a life of solitude. Mathilde's daydreams about wealth are responsible for her misfortune, but the shattering of Miss Brill's daydreams about her self-importance is done by someone from the outside. Therefore, Mathilde is made unhappy because of her own shortcomings, but Miss Brill is made unhappy because of her own shortcomings, but Miss Brill is a helpless victim. In Mathilde's case, the focus is on adversity not only causing trouble but also strengthening character. In Miss Brill's case the focus is on the weak getting hurt and being made weaker.

Imagine the effect of reading an entire theme in this boring "1,2—1,2—1,2" order. Aside from the repetition and unvaried patterning of subjects, the tennis-ball method does not permit much illustrative development. You should not feel so cramped that you cannot take two or more sentences to develop a point about one writer or subject before you include comparative references to another. If you remember to interlock the two subjects of comparison, however, as in the paragraph about Frost and Shakespeare, your method will give you the freedom to develop your topics fully.

THE EXTENDED COMPARISON-CONTRAST THEME

For limited research papers and extended end-of-the-semester themes (and also comprehensive exam questions), you may be asked to treat a number of works from the standpoint of topics such as ideas, plot, structure, character, and setting. For extended assignments of this sort, the comparison-contrast method is applicable, although with more works you will need to adjust your treatment.

Let us assume that you have been assigned not just two weeks but five or six. You need first to find a common ground which you may use as your central, unifying idea, just as you do for a comparison of only two works. Once you establish your idea for comparison, you should classify or group your works on the basis of their similarities and differences with regard to the topic.

Let us assume that three or four works treat a topic in one way, while two or three do it in another (e.g., either criticism or praise of wealth and trade, or the joys or sorrows of love, or the

enthusiasm or disillusionment of youth). In writing about works, you might treat the topic itself in a straightforward comparison—contrast method but use details from the works within the groupings as the material that you use for illustration and argument. To make your theme as specific as possible, it is probably best to stress only two major works with each of your subpoints. Once you have established these points in detail, there is no need to go into similar detail with all the other works you are studying. Instead, you may refer to the other works briefly, with your purpose being to strengthen your points but not to create more and more examples. Once you go to another subpoint, you may use different works for illustration, so that by the end of your theme you will have given due attention to each work in your assignment. In this way—by treating many works in comparative groups of twos—you can keep your essay reasonably brief, for there is no need for unproductive detail.

For illustration, the second sample theme shows how this grouping may be done (pp. 174-79). There, six works are included in a general category of how love and service offer guidance and stability. This group is contrasted with another group of four works (including two characters from one of the works in the first group), in which love is shown as an escape or retreat.

DOCUMENTATION AND THE EXTENDED COMPARISON-CONTRAST THEME

For the longer comparison-contrast theme you may need to document your references. Generally you will not need to locate page numbers for references to major traits, ideas, or actions. For example, if you refer to the end of Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death," where Prince Prospero rushes through his suite of seven rooms and dies in the last, you may assume that your reader also knows about this action. You do not need to do any more than make the reference.

But if you are quoting lines or passages, or if you cite actions or characters in special ways, you may need to use parenthetical page references, as described in Joseph Gibaldi and Walter S. Achtert, *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 3rd ed. (discussed in Appendix B, pp. 297-98). If you are using lines or parts of lines of poetry, use line numbers parenthetically, as in the second sample essay. Be guided by the following principle: If you make a specific reference that you think your reader might want to examine in more detail, supply the line or page number. If you refer to minor details that might easily be unnoticed or forgotten, also supply the line or page number. Otherwise, if you refer to major ideas, actions, or characterizations, be sure to make your internal reference clear enough so that your reader can easily recall it from his or her memory of the work.

WRITING COMPARISON-CONTRAST THEMES

First, narrow and simplify your subject so that you can handle it conveniently. For example, if you compare Any Lowell and Wilfred Owen (as in the first sample theme), pick out one or two of each poet's poems on identical or similar topics, and write your theme about these. For the longer comparison—contrast theme, you will need no more than one work by each author. Be wary, however, of the limitations of your selection, because generalizations made from one or two works may not apply to all works of the same writer.

Once you have found an organizing principle along with the relevant works, begin to refine and focus the direction of your theme. As you study each work, note common or contrasting elements, and use these to form your central idea. At the same time, you can select the most

illustrative works and classify them according to your topic, such as war (first sample theme) or love (second).

Introduction

State the works, authors, characters, or ideas which you are considering. Then show how you have narrowed the topic. Your central idea should briefly highlight the principal grounds of comparison and contrast, such as that both works treat a common topic, exhibit a similar idea, use a similar form, develop an identical attitude, and so on, and also that major or minor differences help to make the works unique. You may also assert the one work is superior to the other, if you wish to make this judgment and defend it. Your thesis sentence should list the topics to be developed in the body.

Body

The body depends on the works and your basis of comparison (ideas and themes, depictions of character, uses of setting, qualities of style, uses of point of view, and so on). For a comparison—contrast treatment on such a basis, your goal should be to shed light on both (or more) of the works you are treating. For example, you might examine a number of stories that are written in the first-person point of view (see Chapter 6, pp. 87-89). A theme on this topic might compare the ways each author uses this point of view to achieve similar or distinct effects. Or you might compare a group of poems that employ similar images, symbols, or ironic methods. Sometimes the process can be as simple as identifying female or male protagonists and comparing the ways in which their characters are developed. Another approach is to compare the *subjects*, as opposed to the *theme*. You might identify works dealing with general subjects like love, death, youth, race, or war. Such groupings provide a basis of excellent comparisons and contrasts.

As you develop the body, remember to keep comparison—contrast foremost. That is, your discussion of point of view, metaphorical language, or whatever should not so much explain these topics as topics, but rather explore similarities and differences about the works being compared. Let us say that your topic is an idea. You will of course need to explain the idea, but only enough to establish points of similarity or difference. As you develop such a theme, you might illustrate your arguments by referring to related use of elements such as setting, characterization, rhythm to rhyme, symbolism, point of view, or metaphor. When you introduce these new subjects, you will be right on target as long as you use them comparatively.

Conclusion

Here you may reflect on other ideas or techniques in the works you have compared, make observations about similar qualities, or summarize briefly the grounds of your comparison. The conclusion of an extended comparison—contrast theme should represent a final bringing together of your materials. In the body of your theme, you may not have referred to all the works in each paragraph, but in your conclusion you should try to include them. If your writers belong to any “period” or “school” (information about such topics would require research and use of correct documentation), you might also show how they relate to these larger movements. References of this sort provide an obvious common ground for comparison and contrast.

First Sample Theme (Two Works)

*The Treatment of Responses to War in Amy Lowell's "Patterns" and Wilfred Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth"**

- [1] "Patterns" and "Anthem for Doomed Youth" are both powerful and unique condemnations of war.^o Owen's short poem speaks broadly and generally about the ugliness of war and also about large groups of bereaved people, while Lowell's longer poem focuses upon the personal grief of just one person. In a real sense, Lowell's poem begins where Owen's ends, a fact which accounts for both the similarities and differences between the two works. The anti-war themes may be compared on the basis of their subjects, their lengths, their concreteness, and their use of a common major metaphor.[?]
- [2] "Anthem for Doomed Youth" attacks war more directly than "Patterns." Owen's opening line, "What passing bells for those who die as cattle," suggests that in war human beings are depersonalized before they are slaughtered, like so much meat, while his observations about the "monstrous" guns and the "shrill, demented" shells unambiguously condemn the horrors of war. By contrast, in "Patterns" warfare is far away, on another continent, intruding only when the messenger delivers the letter stating that the speaker's fiancé has been killed (lines 63-64). Similar news governs the last six lines of Owen's poem, quietly describing how those at home respond to the news that their loved ones have died in war. Thus the anti-war focus in "Pattern" is the contrast between the calm, peaceful life of the speaker's garden and the anguish of her responses, while in Owen's poem the stress is more the external horrors of war which bring about the need for ceremonies honoring the dead.
- [3] Another difference, which is surprising, is that Owen's poem is less than 1/7 as long as Lowell's. "Patterns" is an interior monologue or meditation of 107 lines, but it could not be shorter and still be convincing. In the poem the speaker thinks about the present and past, and contemplates the future loneliness to which

* For the text of these works, please see Appendix C, pages 347-50, 352.

^o Central idea

[?] Thesis sentence

her intended husband's death has doomed her. Her final outburst, "Christ, what are patterns for?", can make no sense if she does not explain her situation as extensively as she does. On the other hand, "Anthem for Doomed Youth" is brief—a 14-line sonnet—because it is more general and less personal than "Patterns." Although Owen's speaker shows great sympathy, he or she views the sorrows of others distantly, unlike Lowell, who goes right into the mind and spirit of the grieving woman. Owen's use, in his last six lines, of phrases like "tenderness of patient minds" and "drawing down of blinds" is a short but powerful representation of deep grief. He gives no further detail even though thousands of individual stories might be told. In contrast, Lowell tells one of these stories as she focuses on her solitary speaker's lost hopes and dreams. Thus the contrasting lengths of the poems are governed by each poet's treatment of the topic.

[4] Despite these differences of approach and length, both poems are similarly concrete and real. Owen moves from the real scenes and sounds of far-off battlefields to the homes of the many soldiers who have been killed in battle, while Lowell's scene is a single place—the garden of the estate where the speaker has just received news of her lover's death. Her speaker walks on real gravel along garden paths which contain daffodils, squills, a fountain, and a line tree. She thinks of her clothing and her ribboned shoes, and also of her fiancé's boots, sword hilts, and buttons. The images in Owen's poem are equally real, but are not associated with individuals as in "Patterns." Thus his images refer to cattle, belts, rifle shots, shells, bugles, candles, and window blinds. While both poems thus reflect reality, Owen's details are more general and public, whereas Lowell's are more personal and intimate.

[5] Along with this concreteness, the poems share a major metaphor: that cultural patterns both control and frustrate human wishes and hopes. In "Patterns" this metaphor is shown in warfare itself (line 106), which is the supremely destructive political structure, or pattern. Further examples of the metaphor are found in details about clothing (particularly the speaker's stiff, confining gown in lines 5, 18, 21, 73, and 100, but also the lover's military boots in lines 46 and 49); the

orderly, formal garden paths in which the speaker is walking (lines 1, 93); her restraint at hearing about her lover's death; and her courtesy, despite her grief, in ordering refreshment for the messenger (line 69). Within such rigid patterns, her hopes for happiness have varnished, along with the sensuous spontaneity symbolized by her lover's plans to make love with her on a "shady seat" in the garden (lines 85-89). The metaphor of the constricting pattern may also be seen in "Anthem for Doomed Youth," except that in this poem the pattern is the funeral, not love or marriage. Owen's speaker contrasts the calm, peaceful tolling of "passing bells" (line 1) with the frightening sounds of war represented by the "monstrous anger of the guns," "the rifles' rapid rattle," and "the demented choirs of wailing shells" (lines 2-8). Thus, while Lowell uses the metaphor to reveal the irony of hope and desire being destroyed by war, Owen uses it to reveal the irony of war's nullification and perversion of peaceful ceremonies.

[6] Though the poems in these ways share topics and some aspects of treatment, they are distinct and individual. "Patterns" is visual and kinesthetic, whereas "Anthem for Doomed Youth" is strongly auditory. Both poems conclude on powerfully emotional although different notes. Owen's poem dwells on the pathos and sadness that war brings to many unnamed people, while Lowell's expresses the most intimate thoughts of a particular woman in the first agony of sorrow. Although neither poem directly attacks the usual platitudes and justifications for war (the needs to mobilize, to sacrifice, to achieve peace through fighting, and so on), the attack is there by implication, for both poems make their appeal by stressing how war destroys the relationships that make life worth living. For this reason, despite their differences, both "Patterns" and "Anthem for Doomed Youth" are parallel anti-war poems, and both are strong portrayals of human feeling.

COMMENTARY ON THE THEME

This example illustrates how approximately "equal time" may be given to the similarities and differences of each work being compared. Because the theme shifts constantly from one work to the next, particular phrases may be noticed. When the works are similar or even identical, terms are "common," "share," "and," "both," "similar," and "also." For comparative situations, words like "longer," and "more" are useful. Marking differences are "by contrast," "while," "whereas," "different," "dissimilar," and "on the other hand." Transitions from paragraph to paragraph are

not different in this type of theme from those in other themes. Thus, “despite,” “along with concreteness,” and “in these ways” are used here, but they could be used anywhere for the same transitional purpose.

The central idea of the theme is that the poems mutually condemn war. This idea is brought out in the introductory paragraph, together with the supporting idea that the poems blend into each other because both show responses to news of battle casualties. The thesis sentence concluding the first paragraph indicates four topics for detailed comparison and contrast.

Paragraph 2, the first in the body, discusses how each poem brings out its attack on warfare. Paragraph 3 explains the differing lengths of the poems as a function of differences in perspective. Because Owen’s sonnet views war and its effects at a distance, it is brief, while Lowell’s interior monologue views death intimately, needing more detail and greater length. (See the discussion of paragraph 4 below.) Paragraph 5, the last in the body, considers the similar and dissimilar ways in which the poems treat a common metaphor.

The final paragraph summarizes the central idea, and it also stresses the ways in which both poems, while being similar, are distinct and unique.

A Close Look at Paragraph 3

Paragraph 4, on the topic of concreteness and reality, shows how equal time may be given to two works without the bouncing back and forth of the tennis-ball method. To show the content of each sentence, let us use *O* for “Anthem for Doomed Youth” and *L* for “Patterns”; the paragraph may be schematized, sentence by sentence, as follows:

1=*O,L* 2=*O,L* 3=*L* 4=*L* 5=*O,L* 6=*O* 7=*O,L*

Thus there are five references to Owen in the paragraph, and six to Lowell, as close as one can get to “equal time.” Three of the sentences (3, 4, and 6) are devoted exclusively to details in one or the other poem, while sentences 1, 2, 5, and 7 refer to both works, stressing points of broad or specific comparison. The scheme demonstrates that the two works are, in effect, interlocked within the paragraph.

Because the paragraph does not exist independently but is a part of the theme, it opens with a transitional emphasis on the “differences” in the preceding paragraph, with the intention of stressing the point of comparison to follow (concreteness and reality). The second sentence introduces a major difference, namely that Lowell’s poem concerns individuals while Owen’s broadly concerns many persons. Sentences 3 and 4 refer to Lowell’s poem alone, and the topic shifts to Owen’s poem in sentence 5. To make the transition less abrupt, the transition word *equally* keeps the reader’s mind on “Patterns” while it also deals with “Anthem for Doomed Youth.” The seventh sentence, referring to both works, offers a brief summary of the similarities and differences explored in the paragraph.

From: Roberts, Edgar V., Writing Themes About Literature, 1991