

Navigate Study Guides

How to Compare Two Characters

Introduction

It is easy to compare two characters—and do a good job of it—if you remember four points:

- The Purposes of Comparison
- Why
- What
- How

These four points interrelate, but let's start with the most important: **the purposes of comparison.**

You can compare any two things—an apple and an aardvark, or a slug and a skyscraper. It's easy to compare things like that: a slug is ___ whereas a skyscraper is ____. You could fill in the blanks without even thinking. And that's the problem: you can do it without thinking. That's why so many papers comparing characters are (say it softly) bad and (even worse) boring. The writers don't know their purpose for comparison in general or for comparing those two characters in particular.

There are three general purposes for comparing any characters:

- 1) You compare things in order to find meaningful similarities and meaningful differences. The more important these are, the more important—and interesting—the comparison. That's why the whole slug/skyscraper thing falls apart.
- 2) As a student, you compare literary characters in order to *demonstrate your understanding of the work as a whole*. If you're writing about Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and you compare Marcellus and Gertrude, you've pretty much demonstrated you don't understand the play well, because there's little meaningful connection between the two. On the other hand, if you compare Ophelia and Hamlet, as two adults following their respective fathers' advice to their deaths, you've demonstrated superior comprehension.
- 3) As a writer, you compare characters to understand the work on a deeper level. (Obviously, purpose 2 and purpose 3 are closely linked.)

And that brings us to **why**. Why are you comparing these two specific characters? You want to examine the two characters and the work they come from until you can complete the following statements:

"I am comparing these two characters in order to show ___ about the work."

"These characters share the following characteristics: ___."

"These characters differ in the following ways: ____."

"These similarities and differences relate to the essential meaning of the work because ____."

Once you can fill in those blanks, you're ready to go on to **what**. What aspects of these characters are you comparing? Be specific, and always have reasons for your choices. Approach the decision of what to compare methodically. First, look at all the ways that people can be alike or different (sex, age, motivation, religion, etc.). Second, look at the many ways characters can be alike or different in literary works: how they are represented, number of lines spoken, when they take the stage, if the work is in their point of view, and so on.

Finally, consider **how** you will compare the characters. Conceptually, you will have addressed a number of the "how" questions by answering what and why, but you will also want to focus your comparison. Are you examining how the characters speak for themselves—or how other characters respond to them? How they see the world—or how the work's conclusion passes judgment on their perspectives? As individuals—or as representatives of their class, race, family, region? Work with those questions until your answers cut to the heart of the work in question.

The final "how" question to answer is how to structure your own essay. Broadly speaking, there are two general ways to compare things. You can write about each character in each paragraph (paragraph 2: A's appearance, B's appearance; paragraph 3: A's motivation, B's motivation), or you can write all about A and then all about B. No matter which structure you choose, always remember why you're comparing these two characters. You must always make a larger argument about the meaning of the similarities and differences, and you must always support those arguments with specific examples from the work.

In other words, if you're writing about *Pride and Prejudice*, don't write something like, "Darcy is male, and Elizabeth is female." Instead, write something like this: "Despite the fact that Darcy is male and rich and Elizabeth is female and relatively poor, they share the following characteristics: ____." And then finish by supplying striking examples in a way that explains the novel for your readers.