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[noelstudio@eku.edu](mailto:noelstudio@eku.edu)

# Planning a Comparison and Contrast

Writing a comparison and contrast essay (often called simply a “comparison”) seems easy at first—you’re just trying to find the differences and similarities, right? Well yes, but it’s a little more complicated than that. When writing a comparison, you have to have a clearly identified purpose: *why* are you finding differences and similarities? Defining your purpose will help you establish your criteria for comparison, and planning your points before you begin drafting allows you to keep your comparison focused and supportive of your purpose.

## So, what does that look like in practice?

Your assignment might ask you to compare two texts, movies, perspectives, books (the list could go on and on), but deciding what points to compare depends entirely on your purpose. For instance, if you’ve been asked to compare the writing style of two authors, you might focus on word choice, sentence structure, organization, and/or tone. However, if you’ve been asked to compare the arguments of two authors, you will examine their thesis statements, claims, and supporting evidence.

Once you determine your purpose and main points for comparison, you can write your thesis. Just like all academic thesis statements, a comparison thesis must have the topic (what’s being compared), the evidence (the points of comparison), and your opinion (what you understand as a result of the comparison). An example thesis for comparing two authors' ethos

might look like this:

**While they both try to advise writers through their use of language and personal experience, Charles Bukowski presents himself as less trustworthy than Stephen King.**

The rest of the introduction will have provided a short summary of each text, explaining its purpose and how the author tries to achieve that purpose. Your thesis, then, outlines the points that you will focus on for comparison and what you have summarized as result.

## How do you organize the comparison?

Comparison essays typically follow one of two structures: *Point-by-Point* or *Subject-by-Subject*. While both formats can support any type of comparison, you should determine which will work best for you in which situation. While Point-by-Point is often the easier to write, it can create a monotonous, back-and-forth feel for the readers. In comparison, Subject-by-Subject allows you to fully explore the points of one subject before moving on to the next, but it can be easy to lose the readers' understanding of the comparison if not done well. You should try outlining both to see which makes more sense for your topic before you begin drafting.

The topics themselves can also help you determine which structure you should follow. For instance, an analysis of arguments might be best presented through a Point-by-Point organization, whereas a narrative comparison (showing change created by a specific event) usually makes more sense when organized Subject-by-Subject.

The example below follows a Point-by-Point organization:

I. Intro: Identifies both texts and purpose

A. Context

B. Summary of Bukowski (Subject A)

C. Summary of King (Subject B)

D. Overview of criteria

E. Thesis: Topic, opinion, and evidence

II. Comparison of Purpose

A. Bukowski: illustrate that experience and dedication are necessary for writing

B. King: illustrate that time and commitment are necessary for writing

III. Comparison of Language

A. Bukowski's word choice

1. Intentionally abrasive

2. Exclusionary

B. King's word choice

1. Precise and academic

2. Inclusionary

IV. Comparison of Experience

A. Bukowski

1. Not easily relatable

2. Not fully explained

B. King

1. Relatable

2. Fully explained

V. Conclusion

A. Brief iteration of the points

B. Explanation as to *how* those points demonstrate King as more trustworthy/credible

When planning (and subsequently drafting) your comparison, make sure that you keep the order of information consistent throughout. In the above example, we introduced Bukowski as the first subject of our comparison. Now, we must always present him first in the body of the essay to maintain a consistent and coherent organization.

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