

Compare and Contrast Writing: Key Issues

The “Compare and Contrast” essay [occasionally it can be an extended paragraph] is one of the most common types of essays on the English and History 12 exams. It is also one of the most challenging. The following are some points that will help you organize your response.

1. “Compare and contrast” means to explain the **similarities** and the **differences** between two topics or issues (e.g. x and y). This is very demanding! You can’t just remember facts; you must also analyze specific examples and demonstrate their relationship to each other.
2. There are two main ways to organize your compare and contrast essay:
 - a. One method is to discuss x and y according to specific topics. Thus, you might have one body paragraph about **economic** similarities and differences between x and y . Then your next body paragraph might be about **political** differences and similarities, and so on. Choose this option if you have many complex examples.
 - b. The other method is to have one large body paragraph for (all of) the similarities and one for the differences. Some people try to have a paragraph each for x and y , but then your specific examples are too far apart to properly compare. On the whole, try to have at least 4 or 5 good examples, and have them arranged chronologically within each of the two paragraphs.
3. You need to go beyond a “soft thesis” (e.g. *There are many similarities and differences between x and y .*) Show your good judgment by employing a “hard thesis” (e.g. *In a comparison of x and y , their similarities clearly outweigh their differences.*) Thus, even a compare and contrast essay is ultimately argumentative in nature. Be careful not to contradict yourself: to say that “ x and y are similar and different” is to say that they are opposites at the same time. Some parts may be similar and others different, but not x and y as a whole!
4. The order of the two body paragraphs depends on your thesis. So, if you think the similarities are more significant, then the differences would go first and the similarities second. Rhetorically speaking, it is always more effective to place your pro-thesis examples closer to the conclusion.

Common Problems:

5. In this type of essay, **transition** phrases are critical. You shouldn’t move from one idea to another – especially if it’s a contrasting idea – unless you indicate this to the reader. Otherwise, moving back and forth between x and y can be very confusing. Use **specific examples**; bland generalities stick out like a sore thumb when you’re analyzing one example in the light of another.
6. Your **conclusion** is the clincher. In addition to summarizing your body paragraphs, you must explain why the similarities are more important than the differences (or vice versa). This is where you show good literary or historical judgment. You need to explain why you weighted one set of examples more than another set.