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Why students struggle with comparisons

Students have difficulties with comparison essays primarily because writing a comparison essay cannot be reduced to a linear process. The intellectual tasks involved in getting ready to write an essay using compare and/or contrast tend to be far more complex, erratic, and recursive than those involved in preparing to write a one-topic essay. Writers cannot merely pick a working thesis and see how it plays out. They must find evidence about two different topics before they can even look for a working thesis.

The pre-composition tasks of a thesis and support essay can be performed in this sequence:

1. Build a working thesis
2. Build a writing skeleton™
3. Find supporting evidence

By comparison, even simplified, planning for a comparison essay might go something like this:

1. Identify two items to compare (and/or contrast).
2. Identify lists of comparable elements of the two items.
3. Identify significant questions that could be answered by comparing items on the two lists.
4. Build a working thesis that answers one of those questions.
5. Select comparison points that are related to the working thesis.
6. Build a writing skeleton.
7. Choose/find comparable points for the two items that can be used as support for the thesis.
8. Refine the working thesis and writing skeleton™ to fit the evidence and the assignment requirements.

At any point in that process, writers may discover their work isn't going to produce a decent comparison essay and have to start all over.

Before you assign a comparison essay

I don't normally spend much time discussing writing before plunging students into writing, but compare-contrast is topic that students understand most readily when it is its uses and purposes are discussed in some detail before students have to write. Elements that students must be taught before they are asked to write compare and/or contrast essays and ways of teaching those elements are discussed in some detail on You-Can-Teach-Writing.com. I will simply highlight a few items here:

- [The everyday uses of comparison thinking](#)
- [The purpose of compare-and-contrast thinking](#)
- [Topic sentences in compare-contrast essays](#)

With a little effort, you can make the preparatory learning for compare-contrast writing an enjoyable change of pace.

Comparison essay comprehensive plan

Comparison thinking is such a vital skill in college, career and everyday life that we need to find ways to support students so they learn how to do it well. It is tempting to give students a template to use so they don't have to do so much hard thinking. I've tried that approach. It was a disaster. A comparison essay template makes comparison writing look as challenging as a mission to Mars.

Often students' real problem is not the comparisons, but keeping track of all their material until they are ready to use it. Students with attention problems and those who are generally disorganized need aids to help them get organized so they can identify and pay attention to the most significant elements of their comparisons.

Have students make their own comprehensive plan templates

A far better procedure is to let students build their own templates as you teach them how to write a comparison essay. Using terms like template and comprehensive plan instead of the English teacherish term "outline" eliminates one roadblock to getting students to plan an essay. Moreover, building their own templates appeals to visual, artistic, and hands-on learners and helps some students who would struggle to see the pattern of a comparison essay within a piece of writing.

You can let them move elements scissors and tape or by working with the table function of a computer's word processing program. Either activity helps students see how the items are repeated to create an essay pattern. Since the comparison essay

is a modification of the standard thesis-and-support pattern, it requires the same three types of graphic organizers for three types of data:

- Working thesis data collection unit
- Topic sentences data collection units
- Evidence summary data collection units

If you taught students to use those data collection units when you taught the basic thesis-and-support pattern, they need only to learn how to tweak the items to make them suitable for comparison essays. The tweaks are small and logical. Students will pick them up quickly.

The tiny data units do not overwhelm a struggling student, and, since even the sharpest kid in the class needs those same bits of data, everyone can use the same material. There's no dumbing down of curriculum, but the material, even if challenging, is not too difficult for the less prepared students.

My graphic organizer for the working **thesis statement** is built as a 2-column, 1 row table. It looks like this:

Topic 1 and topic 2	assertion about relationship between the two topics.
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The organizer has two parts because [the thesis has two parts: a topic and an assertion about that topic](#). In the comparison essay, the true topic is the relationship between two topics which the thesis asserts.

The organizer for first comparison point of the **writing skeleton™** is also built as a 2-column, 1 row table. It looks like this:

I. Thesis + because + [reason statement]
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The graphic organizers for other comparison points will be identical to this first one except that they'll have a different number.

My organizer for details to support a comparison point from the writing skeleton™ is built as a 4-column, 3 row data collection unit. It looks like this:

I	Replace this text with a sentence summarizing a fact about the first item of your first comparison point.
	The source of this evidence is [name] who is an expert on this topic because [explain].
	I found this evidence [where].

Because comparisons discuss the same aspects of two different items, writers need a corresponding summary about the same item of their other item. For convenience, you may wish to have students color items for one half of their comparison in one color and the items for the other half of the comparison in a contrasting color.

I	Replace this text with a sentence summarizing a fact about the first item of your first comparison point.
	The source of this evidence is [name] who is an expert on this topic because [explain].
	I found this evidence [where].

Putting source and citation information with the summary makes it easy for student writers to keep material together. For many students, just having a simple way to remember what they need to record and a place to put it provides all the help they need to write decent comparison essays.

For best results, every row in the template data collection units needs to be written as one complete sentence. Inexperienced writers need the security of a full-sentence outline. By replacing the boilerplate text with a full sentence they write themselves, students produce a comprehensive plan for writing their comparison essays.

The elements discussed in this document are the same ones my *Talk It Out* essay preparation materials guide students through. If you have that package, you'll find this material fits it perfectly.

Comparison essay organization

Essays calling for comparing and/or contrasting elements are organized in one of two ways: block format or zigzag format.

Students writing their first comparison essay, particularly if they have not had good instruction about the purpose and uses of comparison thinking, almost always choose the zig-zag format and present minimal analysis of their material. By contrast, better taught writers and those with more writing experience are far more likely to choose the block comparison format and present far more detailed analysis of their material.

Block organization, shown in template 1 beginning on the next page, discusses all the facts about one facet of item one, then discusses all the facts about the corresponding facet of item two.

Zig-zag organization show in template 2, alternates discussion of comparable facts about the two items being compared. The zig-zag template is very similar to the template used for a single-topic essay.

The colors of the rows in the diagrams of the two types of organization have the same meaning. The yellow rows are particularly significant. Yellow is the row color “reason statements.” In the standard thesis and support essay, the reason statement is typically the topic sentence of a body paragraph. In the zig-zag format, the reason statement is shown in yellow, suggesting it is the topic sentence of a body paragraph.

Notice where the yellow rows are in the block pattern. Notice also that the block pattern has this row repeated twice for every yellow row:

		In the composition, each body paragraph begins with a sentence that summarizes the points in that paragraph.
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Students are not likely to notice that deviation from the thesis-and-support template unless you allow them to discover that fact in your instructional component.

Having students write informally about their observations in a comparison of the standard thesis-and-support template with the zig-zag pattern and then with the block organization pattern is a good way to allow them to discover the differences. The discovery is good for their writing skills and very good for students' self-confidence.

Compare contrast template # 1 (block comparisons)

Student writers usually think a reason for believing a thesis is true must be identical to the topic sentence of a paragraph. They are used to writing short essays in which the each body paragraph topic sentence is a reason statement. However, a reason can be a summary of many paragraphs or even of several chapters of a book. The template below attempts to make that point visually.

Topic 1 and topic 2	assertion about relationship between the two topics.
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I. Thesis + because + [reason statement]

	A.	In the composition, the first body paragraph begins with a sentence that summarizes the points in the first body paragraph.
	1.	Replace this text with a sentence summarizing a fact about the first facet of one half your first comparison point.
		The source of this evidence is [name] who is an expert on this topic because [explain]
		I found this evidence [where].
	2.	Replace this text with a sentence summarizing a fact about the second facet of your first comparison point.
		The source of this evidence is [name] who is an expert on this topic because [explain]
		I found this evidence [where].
	3.	Replace this text with a sentence summarizing a fact about the third facet of your first comparison point.
		The source of this evidence is [name] who is an expert on this topic because [explain]
		I found this evidence [where].

	B.	In the composition, the second body paragraph begins with a sentence that summarizes the reasons in the second body paragraph.
	1.	Replace this text with a sentence summarizing a fact about the first facet of the second half of your first comparison point.
		The source of this evidence is [name] who is an expert on this topic because [explain]
		I found this evidence [where].
	2.	Replace this text with a sentence summarizing a fact about the second facet of the second half of your first comparison point.
		The source of this evidence is [name] who is an expert on this topic because [explain]
		I found this evidence [where].
	3.	Replace this text with a sentence summarizing a fact about the third facet of the second half of your first comparison point.
		The source of this evidence is [name] who is an expert on this topic because [explain]
		I found this evidence [where].

II. Thesis + because + [reason statement]

A.	In the composition, the third body paragraph begins with a sentence that summarizes the points in that body paragraph.	
	1.	Replace this text with a sentence summarizing a fact about the first facet of one half your second icomparison point.
		The source of this evidence is [name] who is an expert on this topic because [explain]
		I found this evidence [where].
	2.	Replace this text with a sentence summarizing a fact about the second facet of your second comparison point.
		The source of this evidence is [name] who is an expert on this topic because [explain]
		I found this evidence [where].
	3.	Replace this text with a sentence summarizing a fact about the third facet of your second comparison point.
		The source of this evidence is [name] who is an expert on this topic because [explain]
		I found this evidence [where].

B.	In the composition, the second body paragraph begins with a sentence that summarizes the reasons in the fourth body paragraph.	
	1.	Replace this text with a sentence summarizing a fact about the first facet of the second half of your first comparison point.
		The source of this evidence is [name] who is an expert on this topic because [explain]
		I found this evidence [where].
	2.	Replace this text with a sentence summarizing a fact about the second facet of the second half of your first comparison point.
		The source of this evidence is [name] who is an expert on this topic because [explain]
		I found this evidence [where].
	3.	Replace this text with a sentence summarizing a fact about the third facet of the second half of your first comparison point.
		The source of this evidence is [name] who is an expert on this topic because [explain]
		I found this evidence [where].

If additional comparisons are needed, writers simply add more data recording units.

Compare-contrast essay template #2 (zig-zag)

Topic 1 and topic 2	assertion about relationship between the two topics.	
I	Thesis + because + [reason statement]	
	Replace this text with a sentence summarizing a fact about the first item of your first comparison point.	
	The source of this evidence is [name] who is an expert on this topic because [explain]	
	I found this evidence [where].	
	Replace this text with a sentence summarizing a fact about the first item of your first comparison point.	
	The source of this evidence is [name] who is an expert on this topic because [explain]	
	I found this evidence [where].	
	Replace this text with a sentence summarizing a fact about a second item of your first comparison point.	
	The source of this evidence is [name] who is an expert on this topic because [explain]	
	I found this evidence [where].	
	Replace this text with a sentence summarizing a fact about the second item of your first comparison point.	
	The source of this evidence is [name] who is an expert on this topic because [explain]	
	I found this evidence [where].	
	Replace this text with a sentence summarizing a fact about the third item of your first comparison point.	
	The source of this evidence is [name] who is an expert on this topic because [explain]	
	I found this evidence [where].	
	Replace this text with a sentence summarizing a fact about the third item of your first comparison point.	
	The source of this evidence is [name] who is an expert on this topic because [explain]	
	I found this evidence [where].	
II	Thesis + because + [reason statement]	
	Replace this text with a sentence summarizing a fact about the first item of your second comparison point.	
	The source of this evidence is [name] who is an expert on this topic because [explain]	
	I found this evidence [where].	
	Replace this text with a sentence summarizing a fact about the first item of your second comparison point.	
	The source of this evidence is [name] who is an expert on this topic because [explain]	
	I found this evidence [where].	
	Replace this text with a sentence summarizing a fact about the second item of your second comparison point.	
	The source of this evidence is [name] who is an expert on this topic because [explain]	
	I found this evidence [where].	
	Replace this text with a sentence summarizing a fact about the second item of your second comparison point.	
	The source of this evidence is [name] who is an expert on this topic because [explain]	
	I found this evidence [where].	
	Replace this text with a sentence summarizing a fact about the third item of your third comparison point.	
	The source of this evidence is [name] who is an expert on this topic because [explain]	
	I found this evidence [where].	
	Replace this text with a sentence summarizing a fact about the third item of your third comparison point.	
	The source of this evidence is [name] who is an expert on this topic because [explain]	
	I found this evidence [where].	

Downloadable data collection units' text

Creating the starter data collection units from word processor tables is a simple task. I recommend you do at least the segments of the template yourself so you understand what the students have to do.

You might want to demonstrate how to make the units as part of your instruction about the function and organization of compare-contrast. To make that instruction easier for you, put the directions I used in my examples in the previous pages into a text file that includes indications of the size of the table into which it goes. You can copy the text and paste it into a data collection unit as students watch. (If you use [ShortKeys](#), you can do the replacements with amazing speed.)

FileType	Short link	Full link
RichText Format	http://bit.ly/x9zdbL	http://dl.dropbox.com/u/11657805/comparison-datacollection-units.rtf

I suggest you let your principal, your school media personnel, and public library personnel know if you make information available as downloadable docs. Students without home Internet access may need to use public access terminals where download capability may be limited or nonexistent. Learn your public library policies. If students are prohibited from downloading files, find out if they can create documents in Word or OpenOffice to save to a flash drive. If so, they can use copy and paste to make their own outline from the templates you share.

Zoho.com free email accounts, which include the ability to create and store documents, are another option for students who must rely on public access facilities.

FYI: (1) The original version of this document recommended use of Google docs. Since Google's March 1, 2012 revision of its privacy policy allows no opt-out other than to not use any Google service, I can no longer recommend Google. I switched to Zoho.com. I find it easier to use than Google apps, and it doesn't have any ads. (2) I am a ShortKeys affiliate; I get a percentage of sales tracked to my recommendations.