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The Comparative Essay

What is a comparative essay?

A comparative essay asks that you compare at least two (usually more) items. These items will differ depending on the assignment. You might be asked to compare:

- positions on an issue (e.g., responses to slavery in Canada and the United States)
- theories (e.g., capitalism and communism)
- figures (e.g., GDP in the United States and Britain)
- texts (e.g., Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*)
- events (e.g., the Great Depression and the global financial crisis of 2008-9)

Although the assignment may say "compare," the assumption is that you will consider both the similarities and differences; in other words, you will compare and contrast.

Make sure you know the basis for comparison

The assignment sheet may say exactly what you need to compare, or it may ask you to come up with a basis for comparison yourself.

- **Provided by the essay question:** The essay question may ask that you consider the figure of the gentleman in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* and Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. The basis for comparison will be the figure of the gentleman.
- **Developed by you:** The question may simply ask that you compare the two novels. If so, you will need to develop a basis for comparison, that is, a theme, concern, or device common to both works from which you can draw similarities and differences.

Develop a list of similarities and differences

Once you know your basis for comparison, think critically about the similarities and differences between the items you are comparing, and compile a list of them.

For example, you might decide that in *Great Expectations*, being a true gentleman is not a matter of manners or position but morality, whereas in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, being a true gentleman is not about luxury and self-indulgence but hard work and productivity.

The list you have generated is not yet your outline for the essay, but it should provide you with enough similarities and differences to construct an initial plan.

Develop a thesis based on the relative weight of similarities and differences

Once you have listed similarities and differences, decide whether the similarities on the whole outweigh the differences or vice versa. Create a thesis statement that reflects their relative weights. A more complex thesis will usually include both similarities and differences. Here are examples of the two main cases:

1. **Differences outweigh similarities:**
While Colingburn's "On the Ties of the City" and Macey's "Of White Hairs and Crises" both follow the conventions of the coming-of-age narrative, Colingburn's story affirms more clearly these conventions by allowing its central protagonist to mature, as Macey's story, by contrast, in that growth occurs.
2. **Similarities outweigh differences:**
Although their aims and contexts serve to different conclusions about whether acquired traits can be inherited, they should be less distinctive of respecting that species evolve over time.

Come up with a structure for your essay

1. **Alternating method: Point-by-point pattern**
In the alternating method, you find related points common to your central subjects A and B, and alternate between A and B on the basis of these points (ARABAB ...). For instance, a

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