

Example: The Compare/Contrast Mode Essay

The purpose of the compare/contrast mode essay is to compare (show how two things are like), to show contrast (how two things are different), or to do both in a single essay. In a short essay like a five-paragraph one, you can expect to only compare or contrast, and not do both.

Note: If you are comparing and contrasting (both) in a short essay, you might be assigned a six-paragraph essay. Then you could have two points in two separate body paragraphs that show points of comparison. And you could have two balancing points of contrast in the next two body paragraphs. An introductory paragraph, four body paragraphs (2 comparing; 2 contrasting), and a concluding paragraph. Perfect!

However, in the compare/contrast essay we are writing this semester, we are only going to contrast, but this is not the moment to introduce our topic. Let's focus on aspects of writing any contrast essay (we can now do away with the compare part of the name for now since we know our focus).

It is a five-paragraph essay, so you will need three separate and substantial points of contrast. And you need to support each with clearly detailed examples. Those examples will be the bulk of your essay in the body paragraphs.

Let's take a look at an example of a contrast mode essay.

The Community College Difference

It's America, and people here think big. It's a cultural assumption to simply think that bigger is better, but is that always the case? Sixty-eight ounces of Coca-Cola with that combo meal is really better than twelve? Perhaps super-sizing it is not always the best way. Obese people up or down the road can expect to develop serious health issues. Larger vehicles typically incur greater operating costs for fuel, tires and insurance. A bigger house draws more funds out of the bank account to heat it in the winter and cool it in the summer compared to a more affordable and modest dwelling. Big cities have greater problems with traffic and crime. Perhaps the job with the smaller company would offer more opportunities and a greater chance to make a cubicle dweller's brilliance stand out all the brighter. Americans would do well to reconsider other situations in which bigger is automatically assumed by many to be better. For example, when graduating from high school and planning a career, is it really such a no-brainer starting out at a massive state university over the little by comparison, almost anonymous local community college? For many students who are new to higher education and who aren't getting a free four-ride, contrasting attending a large university with attending

a community college can lead to seeing tangible advantages of starting out at the humble community college. Indeed, there are significant differences between starting the higher education journey at a community college and beginning at a large state university, and those include cost considerations, the quality of the learning atmosphere, and having more immediate access to a valuable personal support network.

To begin, the most obvious point of contrast between starting higher education at a state university and a community college involves the costs. For example, in 2016 the typical cost of a year at San Diego State University, just looking at the tuition costs, is approximately \$7,000 (www.sdsu.edu), and that doesn't include the mandatory fee of \$752. By great contrast, full-time tuition per annum at Imperial Valley College is under \$1,500 (www.imperial.edu), and the fees are minuscule compared to SDSU's. For those whose robotic knee jerk reaction is *bigger is better*, exactly how is being buried in massive debt upon graduating a better situation when a young recent college graduate is likely already burdened enough with the challenges of starting a new independent life? No wonder why the average student debt from college loans is now \$35,000, according to www.studentloanhero.com. By great contrast, if a student were to start at a community college and transfer after two years, many thousands of dollars would be saved-- even possibly tens of thousands of dollars. Beyond that, savings can be positively monumental when looking at how many students attend a university to which they cannot commute daily, and this can add another eight to twelve thousand dollars in debt per academic year by adding expensive housing costs.

Next, the learning atmosphere at a huge state college often markedly contrasts with that of a community college. Countless excited freshman, initially thrilled to be on such a huge campus, soon find they are not *big men on campus* but *invisible person on huge campus*. If that doesn't compute during walking 30 minutes or more through a sea of humanity on the way across campus to class from the parking lot so distant that it seems it might be in another county, then the realization certainly dawns when excitedly throwing open the classroom doors on the first day of classes only to find a crammed theater with hundreds of classmates in the same class section-- students who also can't believe that what they were warned would happen is actually indeed being manifested before their eyes and will continue to occur every day of the 16-week semester. Finding out during the first five minutes of class that a real professor is not teaching the class, but a teaching assistant who is also a student is manning the chalkboard, serves as foot stomp on the already not simply burst but shredded balloon set ablaze. How is someone going to learn in an atmosphere like that? By stark contrast, most classes at a community college are considered full at approximately thirty students per section, and students won't need to stand up and speak into an auditorium microphone squealing with feedback in order to ask a question of the student-masquerading-as-instructor. As a matter of fact very likely your community college has substantial teaching experience at one or more of those very same mega-universities. One of many factors linked to student success is the ratio of faculty to students (http://nces.ed.gov/npec/pdf/kuh_team_report.pdf). At a ratio of 1:30, instead of perhaps 1:600, community colleges once again hold the less-is-

more edge. On their websites, universities used to brag about many tens of thousands of books they had in their libraries. Now with vast bulk of research materials now living on line, that size issue is an utter non-factor. And at a community college, during that one or two-minute walk from the parking lot to classes, rather than feeling stressed and invisible, new students probably will feel more relaxed and comfortable talking to people. Making friendships that can evolve into lasting relationships occurs more readily in smaller, less stressful environments and can more easily happen among the less populated classrooms, too.

Finally, large state universities might be a place where fewer members of a student's time-tested support network are to be found, compared to if that student had enrolled in the local community college. As high school adolescents transition into young adulthood, they face issues they have never encountered before as they start living increasingly independent lives. True, there are Facebook and Skype to make connections with high school friends and family in order to keep in touch, but it is not the same as being in their presence. And sometimes it's when we are far from home when a serious problem arises, like the flat tire on the freeway in a city where no one knows you or suddenly finding the bank account is barren. Quite differently, attending community college the first few years in the cozy familiarity of one's comfort zone, with family and friends cheering from the sidelines and then at the gymnasium at graduation, can provide a psychological backdrop of security, helping students to focus on their studies. Many students needlessly suffer their first year of studies far away from home in an unfamiliar setting, feeling tremendous isolation. That cannot be productive to achieving a high grade point average. Getting a bachelor's degree takes most full-time students four or five years, and often they get derailed in the first semester or two, especially when far from home. If students would think about putting themselves in the very best position to succeed right out of the gate on Day One at college, keeping their support network close at hand, made all the easier by beginning the college experience at a local community college, can pay huge dividends.

To conclude, when considering the costs of higher education, the educational atmosphere, and the value of keeping one's support network close, attending a large state university or a communication college at the start could not be more different choices. It is somewhat ironic that some students who start at the local college do so by necessity, envious of their university-attending former high school classmates, hardly realizing how fortunate they actually are. Many thousands of dollars can easily be saved over the first two years before transferring (if that is the goal), a better educational experience can be acquired in those 100 and 101 level courses, and the benefits of a personal, local support network can be enjoyed by starting out at the local community college. So the next time someone tries to tell you that bigger is better, below that bulky and glittery surface a contrary and valuable alternative may be hiding.

Analysis of “The Community College Difference”

The Mode

First of all, not that this topic could serve as fodder for an argument mode essay (taking a stand on a controversial topic in which a reasonable person could argue either side), if you look at the wording of the thesis statement (“... there are significant differences between...”), we can see the mode is clearly presented as focusing on presenting differences. (Again, a compare/contrast essay could focus on comparisons, points of contrast, or both.) That’s not enough, so look at the major transitions in the middle of the body paragraphs, when switching from the topic of big universities to community colleges. The transitions are “by great contrast,” “by stark contrast” and “Quite differently.” And finally, check out the sprinkles on the banana split. The title, which is usually written after the rest of the essay is complete), has the word “difference” in it.

More Linguistic Tools • Using Subordinating and Coordinating Conjunctions

The **subordinating conjunction** “while” can be used to set up an SV + SV sentence (While SV, SV) to show contrast from clause to clause.

[“While it is true that..., (point of contrast).

Nevertheless, however, conversely, instead, nonetheless, and still are all **conjunctive adverbs** that can also be set up in sentences to highlight contrast.

When these words connect two clauses, they appear here:

(information you present but which you seek to diminish); however, (your contrasting point)

It is especially the conjunctive adverbs that inject academic tone into an essay, so look for opportunities to use them. Once you do this for a few essays, it will be simply become part of your academic writing style.

Strategy of the Introduction

Note that education is not mentioned until sentence eleven! Before that, the writer has the reader question the assumption that bigger is better, providing a

variety of examples from Coca-Cola to cars to houses to companies. Then there is a transition midway through the paragraph, like this:

Americans would do well to reconsider other situations in which bigger is automatically assumed by many to be better. For example,...

Now that we are on transitions, note how paragraphs 2 through 5 commence. To begin, Next, Finally, To conclude--

Transitions help your reader see your organizational strategy. They help your reader follow paragraph-to-paragraph changes in subtopic, as well as sea shifts in the middle of a paragraph.

Even "for example" introduces a transition from introducing a main point (before the "for example") to an example of that phenomena (after your "for example"). Definitely be aware of transitions and use them frequently throughout all of your essays as don't we see signs along hiking trails and highways? Don't lose your reader by avoiding writing them in. And think about this-- in heavy academic journals, it is commonplace to see such expressions. They might see Mickey Mouse if you are writing about Mickey Mouse, but as the sophistication of the topic increases, such transitional expressions help ensure that your reader does not get lost in the dense forest of your substance laden prose.

Topic Sentences

This next point is huge. Let's discuss why a lot of students lose big points not only on the first essay, but on the second one. This is absolutely a very common reason why: Pay careful attention to the wording of the first sentence of your body paragraphs. In a five-paragraph essay, we are talking about your checking a total of three sentences for this crucial organizational structure.

The topic sentence is the first sentence of the body paragraphs. However, we can't just write anything we want to throw in there. This is academic writing, not Time or Newsweek or a blog, and we have an important rule here.

Here's the rule:

Topic sentences must state what the entire paragraph is about. So that means if we are writing a paragraph that contrasts state universities and community colleges, and the particular point in relation to state universities and community

colleges involves the costs, guess what needs to be in that topic sentence? We need to mention:

- 1) state universities
- 2) community colleges, **and**
- 3) that we are contrasting them regarding costs

all in the same first sentence-- topic sentence-- of the paragraph.

We can't leave any of this out. And we have only one sentence for all this.

The grading rubrics for our essays assign big points to topic sentences. And not figuring out what a topic sentence is by final exam day-- well, you get the picture. (The two instructors scoring your final exam start reading it by looking for your thesis and topic sentences. Yes, they skip around like that to start, then they back up and read from the start.)

So, it really pays off when you are checking your essays to sweep through in a disciplined way. Don't get distracted starting to look for other possible errors-- it is almost impossible to check for everything at once! Devote one sweep through just looking at those three sentences topic sentences and checking their scope.

A Monster Proofreading Tip

While we are on the topic of proofreading and editing, let me add this: Have you ever tried reading your "finished" paper aloud. I am not talking about reading it with just your eyes. Let your voice sound out (or have the weird voice on your computer read it). I guarantee that you will find errors that way that lurk undiscovered if you silently read it. Just do it-- it works!!!

Check the Blueprint !

Another important point to note here is to look at the blueprint and make sure we have three distinct points. A common error is to only have two points that are different. Often blueprint points one and three in student writing are the exact same point, a fact not hidden very well with synonyms.

Let's take a look at the blueprint (list of three main points) for **The Community College Difference**.

We know it's part of the thesis statement. Below it is underlined, and I added numbers.

Indeed, there are significant differences between starting the higher education journey at a community college and beginning at a large state university, and those include considering (1) the cost considerations, (2) the quality of the learning atmosphere, and (3) having more immediate access to a valuable personal support network.

- 1) the cost considerations
- 2) the quality of the learning atmosphere
- 3) having more immediate access to a valuable personal support network

What we are checking for is that all three truly be different points. In this case, yes, they are very distinct.

Restatement of Thesis

Let's check to see if the thesis-- found at the end of paragraph one, is simply copied and dumped in the concluding paragraph. That would be a really lame "restatement" of the thesis. That would be more like a parrot repeating itself.

So let's check the language.

Thesis:

Indeed, there are significant differences between starting the higher education journey at a community college and beginning at a large state university, and those include cost considerations, the quality of the learning atmosphere, and having more immediate access to a valuable personal support network.

Note that the blueprint (list of three main points, each of which will start each of the three body paragraphs) appears at the end of the sentence.

Restated Thesis

To conclude, when considering the costs of higher education, the educational atmosphere, and the value of keeping one's support network close, attending a large state university or a communication college at the start could not be more different choices.

Note that the blueprint List of main points in support of the thesis) appears at the beginning of the sentence. (Well, after the transition "To conclude".)

So the structural components of the sentence were flipped. That sure beats simply doing a cut and paste. Then a few words were changed-- no need to go overboard.

Note: Do not change the order of the items in the blueprint. It would be unnecessarily confusing to do that. Flipping the sentence structure has nothing to do with the order of the blueprint points themselves.

This is how to **paraphrase**. Besides doing some word substitution, you can turn the entire sentences around structurally. That's actually pretty easy when you have two clauses in one sentence. You can reverse their order. You might also use a different conjunction to reconnect the clauses. Other minor sentence structure may also be necessary-- it depends on the sentence. (Somehow, each one is different!)

Like we discussed before, it really pays off to practice paraphrasing. When you do research and bring that information into your essay, 90% of the time you should not quote but paraphrase-- put other's ideas in your own words. (Of course, give credit to the original source! More on that later when we get into our mini-research paper at the end of the semester.) When you restate your thesis in your essay this semester, you are practicing paraphrasing. And that is one of the top writing skills you can ever pick up in college. And like just about everything else in life, it gets easier, and you get more fluent with more practice.

That concludes our example compare/contrast essay analysis. Be sure to keep all these points in mind.

At first, it may be challenging to incorporate all these concepts into your essay. But as you write your second and third essays, hopefully you are able to execute all these aspects and build up your confidence that you know what is involved in writing a college essay, and you know how to execute your plan in those short but substance-loaded five paragraphs.