

A *Comparison* or *Contrast* essay is an essay in which you either compare something or contrast something. A comparison essay is an essay in which you emphasize the similarities, and a contrast essay is an essay in which you emphasize the differences. We use comparison and contrast thinking when deciding which university to attend, which car to buy, or whether to drive a car or take a bus or an airplane to a vacation site.

In this section, two classic organizational patterns of a comparison or contrast essay will be discussed. One is called **block arrangement** of ideas; the other is called **point-by-point** or **alternating arrangement** of ideas. Suppose you are interested in showing the differences between vacationing in the mountains and vacationing at the beach. You will then write a contrast composition. One way to arrange your material is to use the *block* arrangement which is to write about vacationing in the mountains in one paragraph and vacationing at the beach in the next. If you mention a particular point in the mountains paragraph, you must mention the same point in the beach paragraph, and *in the same order*. Study the following outline, which shows this kind of organization. The introductory paragraph is followed by the *mountains* paragraph, the *beach* paragraph, then the conclusion; the fully developed essay is just four paragraphs.

Block Arrangement (four paragraphs)	
I.	Introduction in which you state your purpose which is to discuss the differences between vacationing in the mountains or at the beach
II.	Mountain A. Climate B. Types of Activities C. Location
III.	Beach A. Climate B. Types of Activities C. Location
IV.	Conclusion

A second way to organize this material is to discuss a particular point about vacationing in the mountains and then immediately to discuss the same point about vacationing at the beach. This is

called *point-by-point* or *alternating* arrangement. An outline of this organization follows.

Point-by-Point or Alternating Arrangement (five paragraphs)

- Introduction in which you state your purpose which is to discuss differences between vacationing in the mountains or at the beach
- . First difference between mountains and beaches is climate
 - A. Mountains
 - B. Beach
- I. Second difference between mountains and beaches are types of activities
 - A. Mountains
 - B. Beach
- ∇. Third difference between mountains and beaches is the location
 - A. Mountains
 - B. Beach
- . Conclusion

Application: Block or Point-by-Point

Examine the comparison or contrast essays that follow, and decide whether the authors used *block* arrangement or *point-by-point* (or *alternating*) arrangement. Notice how other authors structure their essays. Five paragraphs or four? *Block* arrangement or *point-by-point* arrangement? Noticing these things will help you become a better, more conscious reader and writer.

Vacationing at the Beach or in the Mountains

People are always looking forward to their vacation period. There are many options where to choose. I think that the two most common places people choose for taking a vacation are the beaches and the mountains. Both places offer a variety of fun activities. The beach offers activities that the mountain cannot offer and vice versa. The mountain and the beach are totally different. The purpose of this essay is to contrast the climate, types of activities and locations of beaches and mountains.

I'm going to discuss mountains first. The three aspects I'm going to discuss are climate, types of activities and location. Climate is always important in order to enjoy vacations. If a person dislikes cold weather, he or she might have a hard time in the mountains. The cold climate in

the mountains is the first barrier to enjoying them, but the climate and the temperature of these zones also determine the types of activities they offer. Snow boarding, mountain climbing, mountain biking, hiking, and skiing are some activities people can enjoy when going to the mountains. There are many regions that have mountains where people can go and have a great vacation. Canada is a country located in North America and contains many mountain vacation sites where people can go and have fun.

I'm going to discuss the beach second. The three aspects I'm going to discuss are climate, types of activities and location. Warm climate is one of the most important features that the beach has. Sun and fun are two words that describe the beach. The temperature in those places is always hot. The sea and the warm climate determine the activities that are available at the beach. People can swim, play volleyball, play soccer, and ride water bikes. In most coastal sites, there are discos and restaurants where people can dance or party throughout the night. Mexico offers many amazing coastal sites to visit. Acapulco and Cancun are two of the most beautiful and famous beaches in the world.

It doesn't matter what place a person decides to choose. The fun is 100% guaranteed. People often choose one of these two options to spend their vacations. Depending on what the person likes is what he or she will choose. I like the beach better than the mountains, but sometimes it is better to take a risk and try a different place to enjoy. (399 words)

Is the essay above organized using *block* or *point-by-point* arrangement of details? Note first the essay is four paragraphs, (1) an introduction, (2) a paragraph about vacationing in the mountains, (3) a paragraph about vacationing at the beach, and (4) a conclusion. This is the *block* arrangement, the first block containing information about mountains and the second block containing information about the beach.

The following essay contrasts eating fresh foods and canned foods. Is its organization *block* or *point-by-point*? How many paragraphs does it contain? How many "differences" between fresh foods and canned foods does the author discuss?

Consuming Fresh Foods Instead of Canned Foods

Eating is an activity that we as humans do at least two times a day. We

live in a world where the variety of food is immense, and we are responsible for what we eat. We decide what we are about to eat and how it will affect our bodies. The purpose of this essay is to compare and contrast the differences between eating fresh foods instead of canned foods. The three main differences are flavor, health benefits, and cost.

The most notable difference between these two kinds of foods is their flavor. Fresh foods have great flavor and taste because they keep all their natural conditions. Canned foods however, lack a lot of its flavor characteristics because there are some other chemical products added to the natural foods. It is logical that the fresh foods will have a greater taste and flavor when consumed just because of the time in which they have been prepared.

Comparing both types of foods we notice another difference. There is a health factor that affects both of them. Canned foods lose some of the original fresh food nutrients when stored, and also it has to be tinned with many conservatives and chemical factors that prolong the shelf life and apparent freshness of the food but could also become toxic if consumed too often.

Yet another difference between these two types of foods is the cost. Canned foods are much more expensive than fresh foods. Here the benefit of buying tinned foods is that they are easier to find, for example, in a supermarket instead of the market like the fresh foods, and they require less work to prepare than fresh foods, just open and serve.

Here are the main three differences between buying fresh foods and buying canned foods. As we can see it comes down to a personal choice, based on the time each person has, the money and the importance he/she gives to his/her nutrition and health. Therefore it is important that you consider your possibilities and choose the best type of foods for your convenience and lifestyle. (347 words)

The essay above is the "classic" five paragraph essay that all non-native speakers of English should learn to write. This essays also contains the "classic" *point-by-point* organization, each point stated and developed in a single paragraph. The essay contains five paragraphs that contrast three differences between fresh and canned foods. The essay includes (1) an

introduction, (2) the development of the first difference (flavor), (3) the development of the second difference (health benefits), (4) the development of the third difference (cost), and (5) a conclusion. In the true classic tradition, the three main differences in this contrast essay—flavor, health benefits, and cost—are stated both in the introduction and the conclusion as well.

How to Support Your Point of View through Comparison and Contrast

It was stated in the first part of this paper that we use comparison or contrast in nearly everything we do. When deciding what to eat, for example, we often choose between fresh foods or canned foods, exactly as the writer above described. However, do you know the preference of the previous author? Did he state it directly? Why or why not? What other ways could this essay have ended?

An important point to remember when writing comparison or contrast essays is that many times writers use comparison or contrast to support a personal point of view. Whenever possible and appropriate, writers *should* support their own views. For example, the following paragraphs are from the book, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* by Robert Persig. Note that Persig's description of the differences between riding in a car and riding a motorcycle is not neutral. Instead, Persig uses comparison and contrast to serve a *persuasive* aim: to show the reader why riding a motorcycle is more stimulating than driving a car ([Persig, by Heffernan and Lincoln](#)).

Which do You Prefer?

You see things vacationing on a motorcycle in a way that is completely different from any other. In a car you're always in a compartment, and because you're used to it, you don't realize that through that car window everything you see is just more TV. You're a passive observer, and it is all moving by you boringly in a frame.

On a cycle the frame is gone. You're completely in contact with it all. You're in the scene, not just watching it anymore, and the sense of presence is overwhelming. That concrete whizzing by five inches below your foot is the real thing, the same stuff you walk on. It's right there, so blurred you can't focus on it,

yet you can put your foot down and touch it anytime, and the whole thing, the whole experience, is never removed from immediate consciousness.

Persig's choice of travel is obvious. In a car, you are in a *compartment* seeing *just more TV*, a *passing observer*. On a motorcycle, however, you're in *contact with it all*, the *real thing*, the *whole thing*, the *whole experience*, *never removed from immediate consciousness*. In writing a comparison or contrast essay, use contrast to show your own preference, to support your own point of view, to persuade the reader which option you prefer.

How to Write an Effective Comparison or Contrast Essay: Summary

1. Know what organizational style you are using. Whether you use the *block* arrangement or *point-by-point* arrangement, you should be able to identify it. Being able to identify your organization will not only help you in the organization of your own writing, but it will also help your reader follow the points you make.

2. Keep your audience in mind. Be sure your reader can relate to your topic. After you finish writing, read your essay from the perspective of your audience. How will they respond to your ideas? Will they understand what you have written? Will they agree with your main point? Will the support appear logical to them?

3. Say what you want to say. Write like Robert Persig did in his book, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. In your essay, make your preference clear as Persig did when he contrasted the difference between vacationing by car or motorcycle.

Finally, to further clarify how it would be possible to say what you want to say in your writing, consider which of the following options would YOU prefer, and why? To support your point in each essay, what characteristics would you choose to contrast, and what support would you use? Can you think of any other topics that might be fun to contrast?

A. Vacationing in Paris or taking a three-week trip down the Amazon.

B. Growing up in a small town or growing up in a large city.

C. Working for large company or running your own business.