UNIVERSITY OF WALES TRINITY SAINT DAVID

INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION AND HUMANITIES

SOPHIA CENTRE

GUIDE TO WRITING COMPARE AND CONTRAST ESSAYS
(October 2024)

A Compare and Contrast essay is a critical review of two or more items. The sources may be either secondary (scholarly/academic) or primary.

A secondary source is an article in an academic journal, a chapter in an academic book, or an academic book.

A primary source may be an original text, an art work or an artefact.

This guide just deals with compare and contrast essays dealing with written secondary sources.

Writing Compare and Contrast essays is important training for writing longer essays, encouraging you to hone your critical skills on a directed topic. Critical reviews of academic articles and papers provide interested specialist and non-specialist readers with a critical guide to an article or book's content and a critique of its argument. Writing a good essay may take several drafts (as would any essay), and they are usually short and precise, yet insightful and analytical. Academic writing comes with fairly tight rules because you need to be able to communicate ideas effectively.

Remember, when you review an academic paper the word CRITICAL is central. In this sense, being critical does not mean being negative. It means being analytical and neutral – you must be led by the evidence. You are concerned with the paper's style, purpose, methodology, and limitations, and its place within the wider academic context.

Sometimes students are asked to write a journalistic review, which contains opinions and value judgments.

However. in the essays we expect you to write, you are not expected make any personal valuations or recommendations. You don't need to write such things as 'This paper makes a major contribution to the field', or 'This paper is highly recommended'.

- Judge the texts you are reviewing by their intentions, not yours.
- Take care to base your analysis on the sources and evidence.
- Avoid criticising the authors for failing to write the papers you think that they should have written. Concentrate on examining the ideas in the papers, looking for similarities and differences.
- Your critique must be carefully considered and based on the evidence before you.
- It also should be carefully structured and use references, exactly as in any academic piece of writing.

You should not discuss the subject matter itself.

For example, if you are comparing papers which deal with cosmology and culture, you need to look at how they deal with the subject matter, **<u>but do not start considering the subject matter itself</u>**. If

the papers deal with quantum mechanics, avoid considering the pros and cons of quantum mechanics. If the articles deal with astrology and culture, avoid discussing the merits or otherwise of astrology. If they deal with climate change, don't put forward personal views on saving the planet. Instead, you need to consider how the text you are critiquing deals with such things.

STRUCTURE

The following is a typical structure of a Compare and Contrast essay review which we offer as a guide.

1. Introduce

Begin by introducing the paper, article, or book chapter being reviewed. As an example, you should write something like:

> This essay compares and contrasts Nicholas Campion's article on 'Astronomy and Psyche in the Classical World: Plato, Aristotle, Zeno, Ptolemy' published in the on-line, open-source *Journal Of Cosmology* in 2010[1], with Liz Greene's paper on astrology and divination, published in Culture and Cosmos in 2008.[2]

The full bibliographic citation can be given either in the text or in a footnote. But you MUST give the full details, whether in the text or a footnote.

2. Contextualise

What is the context of the papers?
What is the subject matter.
What is the intended readership, namely, who the papers are written for – other academics? students? A wider academic readership? the general public? etc.
Who are the authors? Mention the rest of their scholarship. When did they live? Did they have an academic post? Are/were they connected with a philosophical movement?
When the text written? That will help you, and your reader, understand its context in terms of changing scholarship.

3. Summarise

<u>Briefly</u> summarise the articles, papers, chapters, or books.
What they about?
What is the key content and main argument(s)?
What topics are dealt with? How do they deal with the subject matter?
Are there 'thesis statements' – i.e., a central statement about what the text sets out to investigate or achieve?

4. Analyse

It is important to spend sufficient space comparing the papers, discussing the differences and similarities between them in their approaches and conclusions. Remember, the point of

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1 Nicholas Campion, 'Astronomy And Psyche In The Classical World: Plato, Aristotle, Zeno, Ptolemy', *Journal Of Cosmology* 9, 2010 < at http://journalofcosmology.com/AncientAstronomy118.html> [accessed 17 Feb 2021].
2 Liz Greene, 'Is Astrology A Divinatory System?', *Culture And Cosmos* 12.1, Spring/Summer 2008, pp. 3–29.

academic work is not to describe or summarise alone, but to analyse, by examining the authors' arguments and use of sources. This includes:

- Evaluate the texts' writing styles. How well-written are they? Are they easy to follow? Does the prose flow? Are there any examples of technical jargon or difficult language that you struggled with? Are they clearly and logically structured? Or are they rhetorical and argumentative? Is there evidence of bias?
- Consider the texts' theoretical and/or methodological approaches. How do they deal with fundamental concepts? Do they have an underlying philosophy? Does the methodology or philosophy influence the way that information is presented or dealt with?
- Discuss the types of primary sources the texts have used. What types of archival materials did the authors consult? Where did the authors access the sources? How are primary sources used in the article? What kinds of sources have been used? Are the arguments and evidence well-presented and well-referenced? Do the arguments rely on good evidence – or not?
- Evaluate the texts' main strengths and weaknesses (e.g. how persuasive are they? Are there any gaps in the evidence? Can counterarguments be mounted against them?)
- Do the texts have conclusions? Are they convincing, taking in mind the rest of the text?

5. Conclude

Always conclude your essay by revisiting the aim of the essay, restating any conclusions you have reached, and drawing the essay to a close. Avoid introducing new material. Based on your analysis, what are the main differences between the papers you are comparing? What are their similarities?

GENERAL ADVICE

1. Citing Other Works

You should use a number of other texts in your essay: by the time you write your essay, you will have read a number of relevant works. Any one of these could be used to support your analysis and critical thinking. Specific advice will be given with the guidance for each essay.

2. Direct Quotes

Direct quotes are important but should be short. Your word count is limited so you have to strike a balance between quoting directly from the piece being reviewed or from other sources, and paraphrasing in your own words. The general rule in all essays is that direct quotes should be no more than 10% of the total. Furthermore, once you have made a direct quote, comment on it immediately. Remember, evidence does not speak for itself; it has to be woven into your analysis.

3. References

References are vital. Even though it seems repetitive, provide footnotes for statements you make about the pieces you are comparing and contrasting, both for direct quotes and for another author's ideas. If you say that 'the author says x and y', provide a reference and a footnote. For example, if you are reviewing Gumerman and Warburton on Cultural Astronomy, every time you note some important information or an important argument from their work, or make a direct quote from it, include a footnote to their work in the normal style.