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INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION AND HUMANITIES

SOPHIA CENTRE

GUIDE TO WRITING COMPARE AND CONTRAST ESSAYS

PRIMARY SOURCES

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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 primary 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 written texts provides 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 a written document 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 text'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.
- Your critique must be carefully considered and based on the evidence before you.
- Concentrate on examining the ideas expressed, looking for similarities and differences.
- Your essay should be carefully structured and use references, exactly as in any academic piece of writing.

Obviously the subject matter is important but it's not the focus. For example, if you are reviewing two papers which deal with cosmology and culture, you need to look at how they deal with the subject matter, **but do not start considering the subject matter itself**. If your sources deal with quantum mechanics then avoid considering the pros and cons of quantum mechanics. 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. If they deal with the Sun in astrology do not write a general essay on the Sun in astrology.

STRUCTURE

The following is a typical structure of a Compare and Contrast essay which we offer as a guide. There is some overlap between each section, so this is not an absolutely required structure, but we want to make sure that you cover all the necessary components.

1. Introduce

Begin by introducing the paper, article, or book chapter being reviewed. As an example, in the case of the comparison of astrological sources, you should write something like:

This essay compares and contrasts the treatment of the Sun in Claudius Ptolemy's second century text, *Tetrabiblos*, *The Book of the Sun* by Marsilio Ficino, written in the late fifteenth century, and Alan Leo's *Astrology for All*, published in 1904.¹

This essay compares and contrasts the treatment of Venus in Marcus Manilius' *Astronomica*, William Lilly's *Christian Astrology*, which was published in 1647, and the Magdalen Rose Temple.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 texts?

What is the subject matter?

Who are the authors? Did they write other texts? When did they live? Are/were they connected with a philosophical movement?

When were the texts written? That will help you, and your reader, understand its context in terms of changing styles.

3. Summarise

Briefly summarise the texts, articles, papers, chapters, or books.

What they about?

What is the intended readership, namely, who the papers are written for? Practitioners? students? A wider readership? the general public? etc.

¹ Claudius Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, trans. F.E. Robbins (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1940); Marsilio Ficino, 'The Book of the Sun (De Sole)', trans. Cornelius Geoffrey, Darby Costello, <https://mythcosmologysacred.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Marsilio-Ficino-THE-BOOK-OF-THE-SUN.pdf>; Alan Leo, *How to Judge a Nativity*, (London: Modern Astrology, 1922 [1903]).

² Marcus Manilius, *Astronomica*, trans. G.P. Goold, (Cambridge Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 1977); William Lilly, *Christian Astrology* (facsimile edition London: Regulus Publishing, 1985 [1647], online at <https://www.skyscript.co.uk/CA/#read>; Magdalen Rose Temple, <https://www.magdalenerosetemple.com/about/>

What are the texts' overt aims and purposes? To be used in astrological interpretation? To provide general information? To inspire?

Are they highly technical and literal, or more poetic and metaphorical?

4. Analyse

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

Key questions include:

- What is the key content and main argument(s)?
- What topics are dealt with? How do they deal with the subject matter?
- Are there central statements about what the text sets out to investigate or achieve?

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

- 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/ philosophical/ religious 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? For example do the texts focus on events and the outer world, or on the inner world? Or both? If so, what is the relation between the inner and the outer.

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. Do not introduce new material. Based on your analysis, what are the texts' main similarities or differences. Do you have any general conclusions?

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. If you are analysing primary sources then a few secondary sources will provide context on the text itself, the author, or the general time period.. 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 analysing Claudius Ptolemy on the Moon, 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.