

## Writing Compare/Contrast Papers

This genre is a popular one in Political Science classes because professors want to see that students understand how different ideas, authors, or concepts interact. However, these can be challenging papers to write; many students end up summarizing concepts without truly comparing them. While concise, analytic summary is crucial to completing these papers, Professors and TAs want to see that you can identify points of difference and similarity AND assess their significance. Simply noting that authors agree or disagree is not enough.

### **Step One: Identify the key concepts of the two things to be contrasted/compared.**

You must have a clear understanding of each text or concept before you try to compare them to each other. Once you get the question, go back and look over your lecture notes. Then, if you have time, go back and re-read (or at least skim) the texts you will be using with the question firmly in your mind: this will allow you to look for places in the text that relate to the question you've been asked. Once you have done these things, it might help to type up a concise analytic summary of the two points of view or authors to help you. What is an analytic summary, you ask? An analytic summary is a summary that uses only the most significant or salient points from each comparison, which means that you must determine what is important and what can be left out. This is the hardest and most important part of writing your paper.

### **Step Two: Decide the best method to organize the paper.**

Compare/contrast papers can be organized in two different ways. Neither approach is better; they are different and play differently to your analytical/writing strengths.

#### *Holistic Approach: A Focus on the Concepts*

In this method of organization, you will first offer your introduction and thesis. You should then briefly summarize each work/concept, noting important points ONLY if you plan to use them later in your comparison section. (So, for example, if you have been asked to compare Aristotle and Constant on their understanding of participation and freedom, your paper would first clarify what Aristotle said about freedom and participation, then discuss Constant regarding freedom and participation.) Then, in the following section, you'll compare the works and present your assessment. This comparison section can get a bit long since it is probably comparing the two works on multiple points, so you need to be careful to avoid confusion. However, this is a simple structure that may seem easier to approach if you've never written a paper like this before or are uncomfortable with the content material.

- I. Introduction/Thesis/Roadmap\*
- II. Summary/Assessment of Concept One or Author One
- III. Summary/Assessment of Concept Two or Author Two
- IV. Comparison of Concepts and Assessment
- V. Conclusion

### *Head-to-Head Approach*

This method of organization presents your ideas using key points of comparison rather than work/concept. There may be three key points of comparison that are important to your argument, and you'll compare the works according to these points in three separate paragraphs. (Going back to the Aristotle/Constant question, you would first discuss Aristotle and Constant on freedom, then discuss Aristotle and Constant on participation.) This can help ensure that you fulfill the comparison aspect of the paper, but may seem overly complicated if you aren't that comfortable with the concepts.

- I. Introduction/Thesis/Roadmap
- II. Short introduction of the two concepts/works being compared
- III. Discussion of Comparison Point One
- IV. Discussion of Comparison Point Two
- V. Discussion of Comparison Point Three
- VI. Conclusion

\*Note that in either method of organization, the thesis must be followed by a roadmap, i.e. one or two sentences explaining how you plan to present your argument/organize the paper. Since there are two primary ways this kind of paper can be organized, it is especially important that you tell your reader what method you've chosen.

## Visual Representation of the Two Different Methods

<b>Holistic</b>	<b>Head-to-Head</b>
I. Intro/Thesis/Roadmap	I. Intro/Thesis/Roadmap
II. Analysis of Country I <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Historical Factors (past democratic experience)</li><li>b. State Institution Design</li><li>c. Ethnic Homogeneity/Cultural Values</li><li>d. Economy</li></ol>	II. First Point of Comparison: Historical Factors (past democratic experience) in Country I and II
III. Analysis of Country II <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Historical Factors...etc.</li></ol>	III. Second Point of Comparison: State Institution Design in Country I and II
IV. Comparison of the two countries on all four factors	IV. Third Point of Comparison: Ethnic Homogeneity/Cultural Values
V. Conclusion	V. Fourth Point of Comparison: Economy
	VI. Conclusion