

## Questions to Consider When Writing a Compare/Contrast Essay<sup>1</sup> DePauw Writing Center

### What is your frame of reference?

A compare/contrast essay should start with a specific, clear frame of reference. For example:

*In the Apology, Socrates defines knowledge, saying that the greatest wisdom one can possess is knowing that he does not know everything. Similarly, Jonathan Swift expresses his theory of knowledge in Gulliver's Travels, especially in Part III, Voyage to Laputa. During this voyage, Swift criticizes the Royal Academy of London, implying that creativity, reason, invention or innovation alone does not constitute knowledge or wisdom.*

These first few sentences frame the paper. From them we learn that the paper will primarily address the relationship between knowledge and wisdom as illustrated by two different authors in two very different texts. The next sentence introduces the grounds for comparison:

*As both men embark upon their search for wisdom, they encounter groups of people who help define what constitutes a knowledgeable person.*

### What are your grounds for comparison?

Another appropriate introduction begins:

*There is a difference between obsession and passion. When one becomes intrigued and enlightened by studying a subject, s/he may become passionate about pursuing knowledge of it. However, if an individual can think of only that topic, passion quickly turns into obsession. In Anton Chekhov's "The Bet," the lawyer makes meaning of his life by his passionate pursuit of reading on a variety of subjects while in Henry James' "The Figure in the Carpet," the narrator's passion turns to obsession when he endeavors to find the meaning of Vereker's riddling comment.*

These introductory lines combine the two elements: the frame of reference is the idea that in the two stories men are first passionate about their "work," but later one of them allows that passion to become an obsession. This is also the ground for comparison: one story extends the ideas of the other.

### A hint about establishing your ground for comparison:

Try writing your thesis using the word "whereas:" this word helps establish an analytically complex connection between the two things you are comparing:

*Whereas Chekhov's lawyer makes meaning of his life by passionately pursuing wide knowledge, when James' narrator searches for the answer to only one minor riddle, he allows his passion to evolve into an unhealthy obsession.*

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Dr. Anne Fernald's English 130 Lecture, Fall 2000

## So What?

Why are we interested in how your chosen texts work together?

Beware of several common traps of the compare/contrast essay:

- Move away from ½ comparison, ½ contrast. This will do, but it's not very interesting and probably won't earn the grade you want. Examples of this sort of "boring" thesis might read:
  - *Apples are red and round, bananas are yellow and long and yet, they're both fruit.*
  - *Though separated by 2000 years, Socrates and Swift each attempt to define wisdom.*
- A paper that addresses the question, "so what?" will offer analytic detail into the relevance of the topic and will make for a much more interesting paper. In addition to using a "whereas" statement, several verbs might help shape your thesis:
  - Extend
  - Corroborate/confirm
  - Complicate
  - Contradict
  - Correct
  - Debate

The author of the Chekhov/James paper will show how obsession is more detrimental than passion; therefore, the story about obsession extends and idea presented in the first text.

The thesis of the Socrates/Swift paper reads:

*Socrates believed he possessed wisdom because, as he eloquently stated, "I neither know nor think I know"; Swift contradicts that such philosophy constitutes wisdom and instead argues that one becomes wise as s/he learns.*

The writer's argument is somewhat refined as she concludes,

*Despite their disagreement over the definition of wisdom, Swift and Socrates converge in their belief that continual learning and questioning is the only way to wisdom.*

## Does your organizational scheme make sense?

The most common (and often successful) ways to organize compare/contrast essays are text-by-text or point-by-point. Some writers will combine the styles by first analyzing the texts individually and then discussing the relevant points of comparison. Alternatively, if organized by text, the discussion of the second text could include references back to the first text for each point of comparison.

## Have you linked your ideas together?

*For papers organized point-by-point:* Linking needs to continuously emerge. If you're arguing that two seemingly texts are similar, what idea unites them?

*For papers organized by text:* The transition between texts is a "make-it or break-it" moment. This might be a place for a "whereas" statement. It might also help to "zero-in" on the last detail you've discussed regarding text A and make it the first point you discuss about text B.