

Comparative Paper Tips



Why do professors assign comparative papers?

The purpose in writing a comparative paper, as opposed to a paper on a single text, example, or perspective, is to examine how analyzing these texts, examples, or perspectives together enhances your understanding of both of them. The following suggestions can help you answer questions for a comparative paper.

What does analysis look like for a comparative paper?

- You may feel particularly tempted in writing this paper to just summarize the two texts, examples, or perspectives through comparisons and contrasts (“Whereas in public writing the thesis is often not stated until the end, in scholarly argument it should be in the abstract or stated as a hypothesis in the introduction.” “Whereas double rainbows stretched all the way across the sky are so intense, rainbows from sprinkler drops are hard to see.” “Whereas students send email to professors to ask questions about assignments, professors say it’s in the syllabus.”). This is a great way to start your process.
- To take the next step toward your argument you need to analyze these similarities and differences. Explain why these comparisons and contrasts are important to understanding these types of argument, and why understanding them in the ways you highlight matters for your target audience.

What does a thesis for a comparative paper look like?

Your thesis should address both topics you’re comparing and the significance of your analyzing them together. Some possibilities include (but are not limited to):

- Break-up Artist: Find something the topics have in common, and explore the subtle differences, emphasizing how those differences matter.
- Matchmaker: Find something that appears blatantly different, and explore similarities, emphasizing how those similarities matter.

Thesis statements for comparative papers tend to be longer than for papers with a single focus—sometimes three sentences, depending on phrasing and including a roadmap—to address the pertinent questions.

How do I organize a comparative paper?

Comparison is a part of an argument, rather than a particular structure, so you have a lot of options for organization. In the most general sense, here are a few options:

- Spend the first part on one focus, the second on the other.
- Spend the first part on the similarities, the second on the differences.
- Alternate paragraphs on each focus.
- Discuss both focuses together in each paragraph, organizing based on the points you want to make.

Any of these methods may work for you. However, the first strategy is usually the **least** conducive to an effective comparative essay. If you choose the first, make sure to refer back (briefly, don’t repeat yourself) to the points you make in the first part of your essay when writing the second part.

Don’t feel obligated to devote equal space to the different parts of your thesis. You may have more to say about one focus than the other, or more analysis of one aspect of your thesis than another. Feel free to weight your paper accordingly, but remember, this paper is about both focuses, and if you neglect one, your reader may wonder why it’s there at all.