**Practical Skills: Compare and Contrast Essays**

The familiar saying, “That’s like comparing apples and oranges,” is used to express the impossibility of comparing objects that are not similar.  Apples and oranges. All you need to do is show their similarities and their differences. The basic essay form makes compare and contrast essays some of the easiest to write.

**Discover Similarities and Differences**

Before you begin writing, you need to discover similarities and differences between the two things or ideas you are going to compare. Making a chart or a [**Venn diagram**](http://www.cehd.umn.edu/DHH-resources/Reading/venn.html) can help you quickly compare and contrast your subjects:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Subjects** | **Similarities** | **Differences** |
| Apples and Oranges | Fruits with calories and fiber | Calories: 57 per apple, 85 per orange Fiber: 2.6 grams per apple, 4.5 grams per orange |
| Fruits with seeds | Apples have seeds embedded in core; oranges have seeds in edible sections |
| Grow on trees | Apples grow on deciduous trees with warm summers and cold winters; oranges on  evergreen trees in subtropical climate |

Once you have listed the similarities and differences, decide whether there are more similarities or more differences between the subjects. If there are more similarities, you can focus your paper on comparing. If there are more differences, or if the differences are just more interesting, focus on contrasting. If there is a balance of similarities and differences, you might choose to discuss this balance.

**Write Your Thesis**

Your thesis helps you create a focused argument. Replace a general topic (for example, “Apples are different from oranges,” or “Apples and oranges are similar in many ways, but they have several major differences”) with something more detailed and specific. For example, you might say, “Although apples and oranges are both fruits, they have many differences, some of which are shown in how they are grown and processed.”

**Organize your Paper**

The two most common ways to organize a compare and contrast essay are these:

* Subject-by-subject.  Begin by saying everything you have to say about the first subject you are discussing, then move on and discuss all points about the second subject. Frequently, you will have several paragraphs for each of the points in your chart for the first subject, and then several additional paragraphs about the second subject.

Example:   
Apples are fruit trees often grown commercially in large orchards.  In terms of nutritional value, apples contain 57 calories and 2.6 grams of fiber each. They grow on deciduous trees in climates with warm summers and cold winters.

Oranges are also fruit trees grown commercially in large orchards. In terms of nutritional value, oranges contain 85 calories and 4.5 grams of fiber each. They grow on evergreen trees in a subtropical climate.

* Point-by-point. Rather than addressing one subject at a time, you may wish to talk about one point of comparison at a time. Rather than having the paragraphs organized by subject, they would be organized by points listed in the similarities and differences chart.

Example:  
Apples and oranges are both fruit trees grown commercially in large orchards. In terms of nutritional value, apples contain 57 calories and 2.6 grams of fiber each while oranges contain 85 calories and 4.5 grams of fiber each. Apples grow on deciduous trees in climates with warm summers and cold winters. Oranges, on the other hand, grow on evergreen trees in a subtropical climate.

[**Cue Words**](https://coursecms.csuglobal.edu/file/4e59677e-e2dc-4820-aab7-d213b77aeaa3/4/production/ORG300_5/org300_5.html#collapseFourM5P4)

To help your reader keep track of where you are in the compare and contrast essay, you want to be sure to use transition words and strong topic sentences.  The following words may be helpful:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **To signal comparison:** | **To signal contrast:** |
| compared to  on the other hand  however  otherwise  although  while  yet | as well as  both  like  in common with  likewise  also similar to |

For example, a [**topic sentence**](https://owl.english.purdue.edu/engagement/2/1/29/) might be written like this:

**Compared to** apples, oranges contain more calories.  
**Like** apples, oranges are fruit trees grown commercially in large orchards.