

Defining the Terms *Compare* and *Contrast*

The ability to compare and contrast has its uses far beyond the classroom. With practical applications in everything from choosing which insurance policy to buy, to what clothes to pack for a holiday, comparing and contrasting are requirements for much of our everyday decision-making. However, when we discuss these terms in relation to reading skills, they have much more specific meanings.

Compare, in relation to reading, refers to the process of identifying the similarities and differences between two things. On the other hand, *Contrast* refers to identifying only the differences between two things. While the distinction between these two terms may appear on the surface to be quite subtle, it is important that students can accurately differentiate between the two concepts to ensure they are able to answer questions and prompts accurately.

Importance of Teaching Comparative Thinking

Compare and contrast type questions are commonly featured in standardized tests, but there are many more reasons for students to develop their comparative thinking skills than just passing tests. A few of the most compelling reasons include:

- These types of questions serve as good introductions for students to begin developing higher-order thinking skills
- Answering compare and contrast questions helps students focus closely on the details in a text while improving their comprehension in the process
- The attention to detail required in reading to compare and contrast helps students to better retain the information they are reading
- Knowledge gained through comparing and contrasting helps students understand how to organize information, think more clearly, and express ideas more effectively in their own writing.

Helping Students to Approach Compare and Contrast Questions

Though we have established that comparing and contrasting serves as a good introduction to the higher-order reading skills, students can often find these types of questions challenging. The best thing we can do to help our students to effectively answer these types of questions is to offer them a coherent strategy with which to approach them. One effective approach can be broken down into the following steps:

Step 1: Analyze the Question

As mentioned in the introduction to this article, it is very important students clearly understand *what* exactly the question is asking them to do. To achieve this effectively students must break the question down into its simplified parts.

If, for example, the question asks a student to contrast the opinions of two critics on the use of metaphor in a poem, students need only focus on the parts of the text where the critics deal with metaphor and, furthermore, students need only focus on where these two opinions differ. On the other hand, if the question asks students to compare the views of the two critics, they must focus on both similarities and differences in their answer.

Step 2: Identify Similarities and Differences in the Content

Once students have identified the purpose of the writing prompt or the nature of the question, they can start to read the text and take note of the similarities and differences in terms of content. Students can begin the process by highlighting or underlining the appropriate information in the text. They can then record this information in note form or bullet points. These are often sufficient for students to prepare for writing their answer. However, it is often helpful for students to use graphic organisers to visually display the information they extract. Venn diagrams are particularly suitable for displaying comparisons as they can usefully display areas of difference, as well as any overlapping similarities. Venn diagrams can easily accommodate a comparison of multiple ideas through the addition of more circles in the diagram.

Step 3: Identify Similarities and Differences in the Structure

Once students have examined and identified the similarities and differences in terms of content, they can begin to look at how the texts compare and contrast in regards to structure. This will require students to give consideration to the genre of each text. Often, students are asked to compare texts that are in the same genre. Sometimes, however, they will be asked about texts which share a common theme, but are presented in different genres. Depending on the exact nature of the question, students may look at a variety of elements of structure, including how the text is presented in terms of:

- The length of sentences and paragraphs
- The progression of ideas and arguments
- The point of view expressed (Informative? Emotional?)
- The use of stylistic elements, such as irony, humor, emotional appeals etc
- The setting, characters, and plot in fiction
- The use of facts and statistics in nonfiction

Step 4: Identify Similarities and Differences in Media

Advances in technology make it ever more important that students develop their literacy skills in media beyond the printed word. When we think of students reading a text, we must ensure we recognize that texts can be visual and audio in nature too. As part of learning to compare and contrast texts, students should be offered opportunities to compare texts in a variety of media. Many of the texts students will encounter, whether in print or online, will contain information presented in a variety of ways, including diagrams, charts, photographs, and illustrations - to name a few. Online texts especially may contain embedded videos and audio tracks. These elements should not be ignored as they are an intrinsic part of how the text operates and, therefore, students should be prepared to compare and contrast these too.

Step 5: Evaluate

Now that the students have analyzed closely the question or writing prompt, identified the similarities and differences in content, structure, and media used across the texts, it is time for them to evaluate the texts and offer their opinion on their overall merit or effectiveness. The following questions are suggestions of areas to focus on to evaluate the texts:

- Which of the texts is the most convincing?

- Which of the texts best employs appropriate media?
- Which of the texts is the most enjoyable?

In the evaluation students can choose to focus on the most interesting, relevant, and informative material they have identified to illustrate the wider thesis of their opinion.