

Title of Module: Comparative Analysis

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Video 1: Introduction to Comparative Analysis

What is comparative analysis?

In academic writing, you will often be asked to engage with multiple sources. Comparative analysis is a common way of engaging with those sources that builds upon the basic components of an academic argument by asking you to identify and join in a conversation with multiple other writers. Comparative analysis goes much further than a traditional compare/contrast essay, where you are mainly identifying similarities and differences in two texts, because it asks you to engage in an analytical discussion with the goal of coming to a deeper understanding of a concept, problem, or debate.

A common misconception about comparative analysis is that it should largely be an illustration of the ways in which two texts are similar and/or different. This is incorrect. If all you do is point out similarities and differences, you are not truly engaging in a conversation. Here are a few examples of thesis statements that don't involve the writer entering the conversation:

- X and Y are similar because of a, b, and c.
- Although X and Y have many similarities, they also have some differences.
- X and Y are similar because of a and b, but different because of c and d.

With any of the above statements, the only question you are answering is, how are these two texts the same or different? You are merely identifying and organizing facts - information that anyone could find by reading the texts. While summarizing information like this is certainly an important academic skill, it is not an effective way to engage in a comparative analysis which involves far more interpretation, evaluation, and conversation.

The goal of comparative analysis is to bring multiple positions, including your own, to a discussion of a topic - and to identify the significance of the comparison involved.

Reading for and entering the conversation

You can think of all writing as being part of a larger conversation or the context in which a debate or discussion takes place. When you put two articles in conversation with one another in order to shed light on a topic, continue a discussion, or potentially resolve a problem you are “reading for the conversation.” When you are reading for the conversation, you should ask yourself:

1. What is motivating this author?
 2. What other arguments is this author responding to?
 3. What is the larger context of this argument?
 4. What other authors do you know of who are participating in the same conversation?
- (Graff and Birkenstein 173-175)

Once you have identified the conversation your authors are participating in, the next step is to work on incorporating your own voice into that conversation. To “enter the conversation,” you must position your own claims in relation to your authors’ claims and the conversation they are having. Ask yourself:

1. What is my interpretation of this issue?
2. Do I agree or disagree with these authors?
3. How effective are these authors in convincing me of their main argument?
4. What would I say to these authors if I met them in person?

The goal of comparative analysis

Let’s consider an example: Say you read an article that claims that eating a diet high in fat is unhealthy and can lead to health problems including diabetes, heart disease, and obesity. Say you then read another article that claims that eating too much added sugar is actually what causes those same health problems.

What conversation are these authors having? They are in fact participating in a conversation about what constitutes a healthy diet.

How could you enter this conversation? There are many ways. You could argue that the evidence in the article about sugar is more convincing than the evidence in the article about fat; you could argue that both sugar and fat pose potential health risks; or you could even argue that, while sugar and fat can both be dangerous in large quantities, as long as you consume both in moderation and exercise regularly, those risks are largely minimized.

The goal of comparative analysis is to use your two sources to reveal something that is not immediately obvious and has significance outside of the comparison itself. You, as the writer, are putting two authors in conversation with one another and using your own voice to explain what we can learn from taking a look at the two texts together that we cannot learn from each text individually.

In order to begin engaging in this kind of conversation, you need to first establish your grounds for comparison, as we will see in the next video.

Video 2: Grounds for Comparison

The 5 Grounds for Comparison

As we saw in the previous video, comparative analysis is a conversation between multiple writers. In order to compare two texts and allow them to “converse” with one another, you must first identify the “grounds for comparison.” Establishing a clear relationship between your texts is important because, if it seems like there is no connection between the two texts, then your readers will not understand why you are bringing them together for analysis. Therefore, it will be important to briefly establish your grounds for comparison in your introduction paragraph. While there are many different ways to comparatively analyze two texts, there are 5 common relationships that you can consider:

1. **Cause & Effect** - One essay describes situations that see their results in the other essay.
2. **Problem & Solution** - One essay describes an issue or problem that the second essay offers a potential solution for.
3. **Theory & Example** - One essay introduces a theory or concept and the second essay offers an illustration or example of that theory. This relationship is also commonly called a “lens” because you are using one essay (the theory) as a lens through which you can view the other essay (the example).
4. **Debate** - Both essays make a claim about or take a position within a larger debate. The two essays could argue for the same side or opposite sides in that debate.
5. **Thematic Discussion** - Both essays offer perspectives on the same theme/topic that illuminate the bigger picture.

Consider the example from the previous video about sugar and fat. We already identified that these texts are both part of the larger conversation about a healthy diet. What is the relationship between these two texts? There are several that could be worth exploring. For example:

1. Cause & Effect - Since both essays are exploring the cause of diabetes, heart disease, and obesity, you could analyze which cause is more accurate.
2. Problem & Solution - Similarly, both essays are exploring the problem of health risks due to diet. You could analyze whether the proposed solutions (stop eating sugar and/or fat) could effectively solve the problem. You could also analyze which solution is more effective.
3. Debate - Since these two texts disagree about the cause of these health risks, you could facilitate a debate between the two.
4. Thematic Discussion - The theme here would be healthy eating. You could analyze the overall health risks associated with each type of food and come to your own conclusion based on the evidence provided in each text.

It's important to keep in mind that the above 5 grounds for comparison are merely relationships that your two essays may have. Thinking about these relationships is a good starting point for comparative analysis, but these relationships are NOT meant to function as your claim. To get from a comparative relationship to your claim, you should think about why you want to get involved in that conversation and how to make your voice contribute.

Identifying the significance

Establishing the grounds for comparison is so important because it can help to illustrate the significance of making this comparison in the first place. You need to explain why it is important to have this conversation. To begin, consider the following questions:

1. Who cares about this topic or needs to understand these ideas?
2. Why did you choose to compare these two texts specifically over any others that may also be able to converse on a similar topic?
3. What is it about these two texts in particular that demands further exploration/analysis?
4. What new idea does your analysis present by bringing these two authors into this conversation?
5. What can you learn from both of them together that you can't learn from each one individually?

Let's go back to our example about healthy eating to identify the significance of making this comparison.

Who cares about staying healthy? Most people.

What is it about comparing these two texts that is so significant? They disagree about what causes these diseases.

Why do we need to know whether it is sugar or fat that is causing these health problems? So that we can avoid eating food that increases our risk of developing a diet-related illness.

What can we learn by analyzing both texts together that we can't learn from each one individually? There are health risks associated with both fat and sugar. Demonizing one

would ignore the potential dangers of the other, so we need to take both texts into consideration.

Video 3: Organization

Point-by-point

There are two main ways to organize your paper when you are writing a comparative analysis. The first is called “point-by-point.” Point-by-point organization involves identifying 2-3 specific points of comparison and then organizing your paragraphs by those points. In each paragraph, you would analyze both texts within the context of the main point you want to make.

Continuing with the example from the previous videos, here is what we know so far:

The Conversation - There are many health risks associated with certain foods. Are there certain foods we should avoid eating because they are more dangerous than others? What does a healthy diet consist of?

The Grounds for Comparison - Problem & Solution - Both texts identify the same problem (diabetes, heart disease, and obesity), but each provides a different solution. Which solution is more effective?

Claim - Although many people believe that eating a high-fat diet may cause certain health risks, eliminating added sugar from your diet is actually a better way to decrease your risk of diabetes, heart disease, and obesity.

Here is an example of a point-by-point comparison on this topic:

First Point of Comparison - Sugar is more physically addictive than fat; therefore, it is both more difficult and more necessary to limit the amount of sugar in your diet.

Second Point of Comparison - While many of the common sources of fat in your diet also contain other important nutrients, such as protein and iron, sugar does not provide the same nutritional benefits.

Third Point of Comparison - Sugar is often added to food, whereas fat is often reduced, so it is important to be aware of the hidden sources of sugar in your diet.

As you can see, we are comparing sugar and fat in three different ways, and the analysis is based on these three points of comparison.

Block-by-block

The second way to organize your comparative analysis is in blocks that are divided by text, author, or voice. With this method of organization, instead of focusing on specific points that connect your two texts, you would focus on presenting and evaluating the claims of each text one at a time.

Let's take another approach with the previous example:

The Conversation - There are many health risks associated with certain foods. Are there certain foods we should avoid eating because they are more dangerous than others? What does a healthy diet consist of?

The Grounds for Comparison - Debate - These two texts disagree with one another about the cause of diabetes, heart disease, and obesity. Is sugar or fat the true culprit?

Claim - To reduce the risk of developing diet-related illnesses, it is necessary to eat a diet that is low in both fat and sugar.

Here is an example of a block-by-block comparison on this topic:

Block 1: (Text A) Fat causes diet-related illnesses because...

Block 2: (Text B) Sugar causes diet-related illnesses because...

Block 3: (Your Voice) Both fat and sugar can increase the risk of diet-related illnesses because...

List of References (in MLA style):

Folse, Keith, and Tison Pugh. *Great Writing 5: Greater Essays*. 3rd ed., Cengage Learning, 2015.

Graff, Gerald, and Cathy Birkenstein. *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*. 3rd ed. W.W. Norton, 2014.

Tompkins, Case. "Writing in Literature: Writing the Prompt Paper." *Purdue Online Writing Lab*, 06 Dec. 2013, <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/713/02/>.

Walk, Kerry. "How to Write a Comparative Analysis." *Harvard College Writing Center*, 1998, writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/how-write-comparative-analysis. Accessed February 2018.

Notes and Additional Instructions for the module: *This module is recommended as supplemental material for WR098 Paper 2: Comparative Analysis*

Endnote: This module follows the philosophy of the Writing Program and refers to the work of Kevin Barents, Holly Schaff, and Lesley Yoder for specific guidelines, categories, and best practices.