

Intermediate Reading

Comparison and Contrast

Session 10

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What are Compare and Contrast?

On any given day, you compare and contrast a wide variety of things. Maybe you compare two health care plans to decide on which to apply for. Or, while shopping, you contrast two different shirts to decide which to purchase. One shirt costs less, but the second one is more flattering. If you really think about it, you are constantly comparing and contrasting to make many of the everyday decisions in life.

However, when discussing a reading selection, comparing and contrasting take on a more specific meaning. To **compare** means to identify the similarities and differences between two things, and to **contrast** means to identify only the differences between two things. This might seem like a small distinction, but it can be very important depending on the task you are assigned. For instance, if the prompt calls for only contrasting ideas, then you should only look for differences and ignore the similarities. Overall, regardless of the particulars of the prompt, when comparing and contrasting there are some simple steps you can take to do so successfully.

Comparative Thinking Skills: Teaching Students to Compare and Contrast

The ability to compare and contrast is one of the first higher-order reading comprehension skills students are introduced to. And it is no wonder, as the ability to categorise and compare things in terms of their differences and similarities corresponds to some of the earliest stages of cognitive development. Without the ability to group things effectively in terms of their similarities and differences, much of what we consider as 'learning' would be impossible.

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.

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 a 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.

<https://www.literacyideas.com/compare-and-contrast>

Comparing and Contrasting Within and Between Text

Good readers understand new ideas in texts by thinking about how things are alike or different. They make comparisons between texts and between prior knowledge and new ideas. This understanding deepens their comprehension. The process of comparing and contrasting is used to identify how two or more things are alike and different. This skill requires readers to think more deeply about what they are reading in order to determine these likenesses and differences. This skill helps children identify language cues, define ideas and clarify thinking, making information memorable by engaging them in critical thoughts.

Compare is to think about how two things are alike. Contrast is to think about how two things are different. Key vocabulary words signal that a comparison or contrast is about to be made in text. These include:

<i>Contrast</i>	<i>Compare</i>
<i>although</i>	<i>alike</i>
<i>instead of</i>	<i>same as</i>
<i>however</i>	<i>similar to</i>
<i>but not</i>	<i>compared with</i>
<i>different from</i>	<i>as well as</i>

Focus Questions

What does this selection remind you of?
What does (idea from selection) remind you of?
What comparisons did the author use to describe ideas?
What similes or metaphors did the author use to describe ideas in the selection?
What are the similarities described? What are the differences described?
How did the author help readers learn new ideas?