

Any time you are taking a look at two or more things, in an effort to identify similarities and/or differences, you are engaged in comparison. This is something we frequently do. For example, if you are planning to buy a car, you will likely do some comparing – identifying similarities among varied models – as well as contrasting – identifying differences.

For example, if you were shopping for a new car, you might first identify the style of vehicle you are looking for. A list of the possibilities might look something like this:

*compact sedan, larger sedan, minivan, SUV, pickup*

You might spend some time comparing and/or contrasting the general features of each type of vehicle to see how they size up to your needs. Once you decide that a smaller SUV best fits your needs, you identify the models that are available:

*Toyota Rav4, Ford Escape, Chevy Tracker, Subaru Forrester, Honda Accord*

Next, you'll spend some time analyzing the features and ratings of these vehicles. Your goal is to identify similarities and differences so that you can make the best choice for yourself.

That, in essence, is what you are doing when you write a comparison and/or contrast paper. Whatever the topic, your goal is to find similarities and differences, usually in an effort to reach some sort of conclusion. If you were to decide that there are more similarities than differences between the two items or that the similarities are more interesting than the differences, you would write a paper of comparison. If the opposite were true, you would write a contrast paper. And, if there were a fairly equal number of similarities and differences, you would write a paper in which you share both. As a result, your “conclusion” may be neutral.

### **Significance in the Workplace**

It's a rare job where you don't have to do some comparing. Consider the following examples:

- Comparing computers and vendors to determine what computers a company will purchase for use by its employees
- Comparing resumes to determine which candidates to interview for a position
- Comparing contractors to see who will build that new office building
- Comparing health insurance plans from various companies

Comparing is a major part of what we do--on the job and in our day-to-day lives.\

## Purpose in Writing a Comparison/Contrast Paper

Your purpose in writing a comparison paper always involves seeking out similarities and differences between two or more items. What may vary, however, is what your reader will do with that information.

- Are you merely seeking agreement with the conclusions of your comparison?
- Are you seeking action (e.g., a decision to purchase a particular product) from your reader?

The major difference between these two possibilities is that in the latter, you need to clearly state what you want your reader to do. You will probably include a statement like the one below in your conclusion, but you could also present your “call to action” in the introduction.

*Therefore, I urge you to purchase the XZ2008 laptop computer for all employees.*

## Organization of a Comparison Paper

### Introduction

Use your introduction to gain the attention of your reader (if you are not writing for “captive readers”—those who are anticipating your report or proposal because they desire the information you are providing), state your thesis, and preview the main points of your paper. Within your thesis, be sure to convey if you are comparing only (i.e. showing similarities), contrasting only (i.e. showing differences), or comparing and contrasting (i.e. showing both similarities and differences). You may also convey which item of comparison you prefer or promote over the other one.

### Body

If you were comparing SUV’s with sedans, your body “outline” should resemble one of the two shown below. As shown in the chart, you can organize the body two different ways: the point-by-point method or the block method. Either body set-up can effectively compare and/or contrast. But, the point-by-point method allows readers to more readily understand the similarities and/or differences. Yet, the block method allows readers to focus on just one of the items of comparison at a time. Sometimes, that can increase understanding.

Point-by-Point	Block
A. Cost a. SUV b. sedan B. Safety concerns a. SUV b. sedan C. Reliability a. SUV b. sedan	A. SUV 1. cost 2. safety concerns 3. reliability B. Sedan 1. cost 2. safety concerns 3. reliability

The number of paragraphs that constitute the body will depend upon the amount of information that you have to share and/or the depth of your comparisons and/or contrasts. So, if you are following the point-by-point method, you create three longer paragraphs on A, B, and C or six shorter paragraphs on Aa, Ab, Ba, Bb, and Ca and Cb. On the other hand, if you are using the block format, you might have two long body paragraphs, one on A and one on B. Or, you could have six body paragraphs that cover A1, A2, A3, B1, B2, and B3.

**Conclusion**

The conclusion’s content depends on what you are trying to accomplish. You should summarize, and then you might give a recommendation, or you may state which you prefer over the other other and why. All of this should bring a sense of closure to your paper.

**Examples of Comparison/Contrast Writing**

See the Online Writing Center’s “WINK: An Online Journal” to read well-written examples of comparison writing by Western Technical College students.