

# Comparative Essays

Writing a comparison usually requires that you assess the **similarities** and **differences** between **two or more theories, procedures, or processes**. You explain to your reader what **insights** can be gained from the comparison, or **judge** whether one thing is better than another according to established criteria.

**Helpful tip:** When you are asked to write a comparative essay, remember that, unless you are instructed otherwise, you are usually being asked to assess both **similarities** and **differences**. Such essays may be called **comparative essays, comparison essays, or compare-and-contrast essays**.

## How to write a comparative essay

- Establish a basis of comparison

A basis of comparison represents the **main idea, category, or theme** you will investigate. You will have to do some **preliminary reading**, likely using your course materials, to get an idea of what kind of criteria you will use to assess whatever you are comparing. A basis of comparison must apply to **all** items you are comparing, but the details will be different.

For example, if you are asked to "compare neoclassical architecture and gothic architecture," you could compare the influence of **social context** on the two styles.

- Gather the details of whatever you are comparing

Once you have decided what theme or idea you are investigating, you will need to gather details of whatever you are comparing, especially in terms of **similarities** and **differences**. Doing so allows you to see which criteria you should use in your comparison, if not specified by your professor or instructor.

*e.g.*

*Neoclassical architecture versus Gothic architecture*

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Neoclassical Architecture</b>	<b>Gothic Architecture</b>
Churches	Appeal to Greek perfection	Appeal to emotion
Civic buildings	Columns	Towers and spires
Palaces	Formulaic and mathematical	Wild and rustic

**Helpful tip:** Organize your criteria in **columns** or a **Venn diagram**; using visual methods to map your pre-writing work can help you to stay on track and more clearly get a sense of how the essay will be structured.

Based on the information in the above table, you could focus on how ornamentation and design principles reveal prevailing intellectual thought about architecture in the respective eras and societies.

- Develop a thesis statement

After brainstorming, try to develop a **thesis statement** that identifies the **results** of your comparison. Here is an example of a fairly common thesis statement structure:

*e.g., Although neoclassical architecture and gothic architecture have [similar characteristics A and B], they reveal profound differences in their interpretation of [C, D, and E].*

**Helpful tip:** Avoid a thesis statement that simply states your obvious purpose.

*e.g., The aim of this essay is to compare [A and B] with reference to [X, Y, and Z].*

- Organize your comparison

You have a choice of two basic methods for organizing a comparative essay: the point-by-point method or the block method.

The **point-by-point method** examines **one aspect** of comparison in each paragraph and usually **alternates** back and forth between the two objects, texts, or ideas being compared. This method allows you to emphasize points of similarity and of difference as you proceed.

In the **block method**, however, you say **everything** you need to say about one thing, then do the same thing with the other. This method works best if you want readers to understand and agree with the advantages of something you are proposing, such as introducing a new process or theory by showing how it compares to something more traditional.

## Sample outlines for comparative essays on neoclassical and gothic architecture

### Building a point-by-point essay

Using the point-by-point method in a comparative essay allows you to draw **direct comparisons** and produce a more **tightly integrated** essay.

**Helpful tip:** Note that you can have **more than three points of comparison**, especially in longer essays. The points can be **either** similarities or differences. Overall, in order to use this method, you must be able to apply criteria to **every** item, text, or idea you are comparing.

1. **Introduction**
  - a. Introductory material
  - b. Thesis: Although neoclassical and gothic architecture are both western European forms that are exemplified in civic buildings and churches, they nonetheless reveal, through different structural design and ornamentation, the different intellectual principles of the two societies that created them.
2. **Body section/Paragraph 1: Criterion A (Ornamentation)**
  - a. Text 1
  - b. Text 2
3. **Body section/Paragraph 2: Criterion B (Major appeal)**
  - a. Text 1
  - b. Text 2
4. **Body section/Paragraph 3: Criterion C (Style)**
  - a. Text 1
  - b. Text 2
5. **Conclusion**
  - a. Summary
  - b. Why this comparison is important and what it tells readers

## **Building a block method essay**

Using the block method in a comparative essay can help ensure that the ideas in the second block **build upon** or **extend ideas** presented in the first block. It works well if you have **three or more major areas of comparison** instead of two (for example, if you added in a third or fourth style of architecture, the block method would be easier to organize).

### **1. Introduction**

- a. Introductory material
- b. Thesis: The neoclassical style of architecture was a conscious rejection of the gothic style that had dominated in France at the end of the middle ages; it represented a desire to return to the classical ideals of Greece and Rome.

### **2. Body**

- a. Text 1: History and development
- b. Text 2: Change from earlier form; social context of new form
- c. Synthesis and analysis: What does the comparison reveal about architectural development?

### **3. Conclusion**

- a. Summary
- b. Why this comparison is important and what it tells readers