



HANDOUT | The comparison/analysis literature essay

A common essay assignment for a literature class asks you to *compare* several works by the same or different authors. Your essay, by extension, would be an example of a *comparison analysis essay*. Comparing works of literature—or philosophies, or scientific theories, or economic structures, or anything else—allows us to draw conclusions based on *commonalities* and *differences*.

A friendly warning

Beware: comparison discussion can be deceptively simple. Because we compare things all the time, and note similarities and differences all the time, it can seem a pretty straightforward task to compare theme (or setting, or character, etc.) in several works of literature. A simple descriptive comparison, however, would NOT be an effective or successful response to the assignment. Such an essay should address a meaningful, coherent focus that goes beyond a superficial comparison or discussion to a thoughtful examination of the works. What, you may be wondering, is the difference between a “superficial comparison” and a “meaningful, coherent focus”? Think of it as the difference between simple *comparison* and *comparison analysis*.

An example or two (or three)

Imagine you had reason to write about poetry and had found interesting material in a comparison of the W. H. Auden poem “Stop All the Clocks” and selections from Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself.” Examine the potential focuses below, each expressed as a thesis statement:

- 1 There are ways in which the two poems are similar, but they also have many differences.
- 2 Auden’s and Whitman’s poems are mostly different: Auden’s rhymes, and is about a lover who has died, while Whitman’s is free verse and addresses a multitude of ideas.
- 3 Though significantly different in form and in focus, both Auden’s and Whitman’s poems communicate their ideas chiefly through imagery of the commonplace and the everyday.

(Quite) a few words about the examples

Only one of these potential theses is actually an effective response to the assignment.

Example 1 *There are ways in which the two poems are similar, but they also have many differences.*

- Thesis number one is really not a thesis at all. It might seem like a waste of time to mention this here, but, it’s actually a common response to comparison assignments.

The example should seem weak to you. It not only merely describes the comparison; it is completely unspecific. In effect, it repeats the assignment, which was to compare the two works.

To be different but have the potential of being similar is a requirement of comparison; we can't compare otherwise.¹ Essentially, thesis number one just says, "Hey, I compared these two poems."

Example 2 *Auden's and Whitman's poems are mostly different: Auden's rhymes, and is about a lover who has died, while Whitman's is free verse and addresses a multitude of ideas.*

- Thesis number two is vastly superior to number one in terms of its specificity, but it, too, fails to effectively analyze its comparison. Imagine the discussion that would support this thesis: it would describe each of the pieces in terms of subject matter and in terms of rhyme/free verse, but in the end we would only be able to say what each poem is about and what form it takes; we would have learned nothing significant from the comparison. It leaves the reader in what writing teachers call the "so what?" position. It would be comparison, but not a *meaningful* comparison; comparison, but not *comparison analysis*.

Example 3 *Though significantly different in form and in subject matter, both Auden's and Whitman's poems communicate their ideas chiefly through imagery of the commonplace and the everyday.*

- Thesis number three is an example of an effective focus for comparison analysis. Notice that it not only indicates some specifics about similarities and differences (different in form; different in subject matter; similar in use of imagery), but *it articulates a significant conclusion that the writer has drawn as a result of the comparison*: though the poems seem quite different, it turns out that they "work" in a quite similar way. Not just *comparison*; *comparison analysis*.

Notice, too, that the difference can be subtle. It would be merely descriptive to say, "The poems are quite different in form and subject matter, but both use everyday imagery." Well, okay—but so what? But isn't it interesting, isn't it a point of *analysis*, to note that *despite* their apparent differences, both poems "communicate their ideas" in chiefly similar ways? We hope you can see the difference.

A (final) word on the subject

Please undertake comparison analysis of literature thoughtfully and with care. You should absolutely examine the works in which you are interested by taking note of all the important ways in which they are alike and different. This, however, is just the beginning of the *process* of seeking significant meaning in the comparison. Push yourself beyond that description; ask *yourself* "So what?" so that you won't leave the reader asking it of you.

¹ (To do so is called "comparing apples and oranges," which is supposed to mean "foolishly trying to compare two things that have nothing at all in common; comparing things that can't be compared"—confusing, since most people immediately identify apples and oranges as inarguably similar: small, tree-borne fruits with peels, seeds, etc.)