

**COMPARE
AND
CONTRAST
ESSAYS**

by
Anne Garrett

- **Comparison discusses similarities (common properties).**
- **Contrast discusses differences (properties each have that the other lacks).**
- **Be certain which action is being requested.**
- **Is it *either/or* or *both*?**

What is the purpose of the assignment?

It is not enough to merely list what is the same and what is different. Why is it important to see what is the same and what is different?

Compare and contrast essays promote critical thinking, which is why this type of assignment is so popular.

- **What overall pattern is operating in the similarities and why does it matter? How does the comparison enhance our understanding of the separate entities?**
- **What is the cause of the differences and why does it matter? What unique and new insight comes from contrasting the entities?**

The answer to these questions will form your thesis statement. The thesis must make a claim that goes beyond the listing of similarities and differences and creates a new understanding, a weaving together of separate strands to make a new form. This new synthesis becomes your thesis.

EXAMPLE

Your assignment is to compare a book to a movie based on that book. To merely list the plot similarities and the divergences from the plot could be done by anyone.

Put in your own analysis, something only you can come up with.

Obviously not everything in a book can fit in a movie, but why were certain items chosen over others to be omitted? Is something emphasized more in one or the other? Why? Is something completely different in the movie? Why?

- **What does that say about the strengths or weaknesses in the novel or the movie?**
- **What does that say about the time period in which the book was written as opposed to the time period the movie was made?**
- **What does that say about the two different mediums and their respective audiences?**

Why do we care about any of this anyway?

Ask yourself “so what?” for every similar and different item you can come up with.

The answer to “so what” is the analysis that the essay needs.

BREAK DOWN INTO PARTS

When writing compare and contrast essays, one is often dealing with a vast amount of detail. The subject must be broken down into parts for analysis and a sufficient number of significant characteristics and details must be considered. Pull it apart and look at each detail in isolation so you can decide how they all go together.

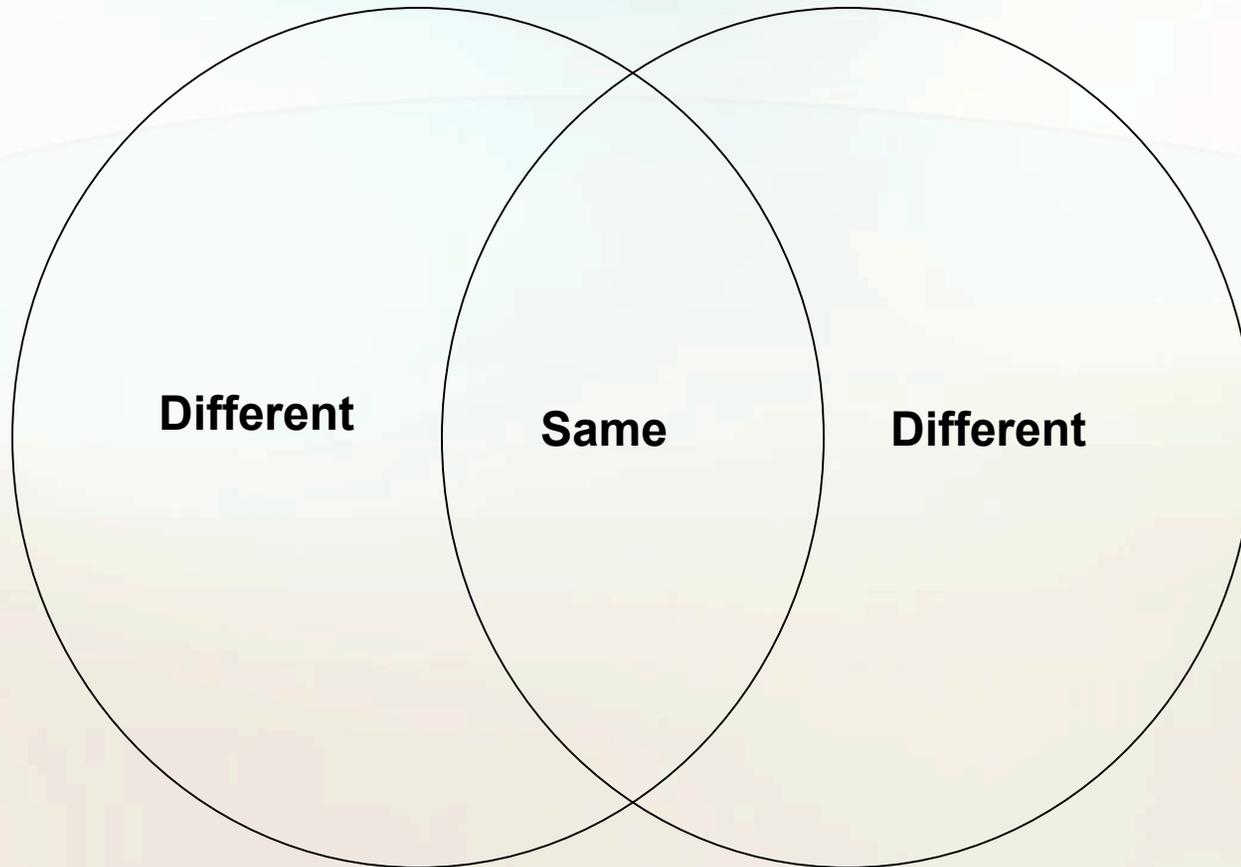
BRAINSTORMING

Start first with brainstorming to determine what is the same and what is different. You can use a Venn diagram or a listing strategy, clearly separating one subject from the other.

Let's say we are going to compare and contrast frogs and cats.

VENN DIAGRAM

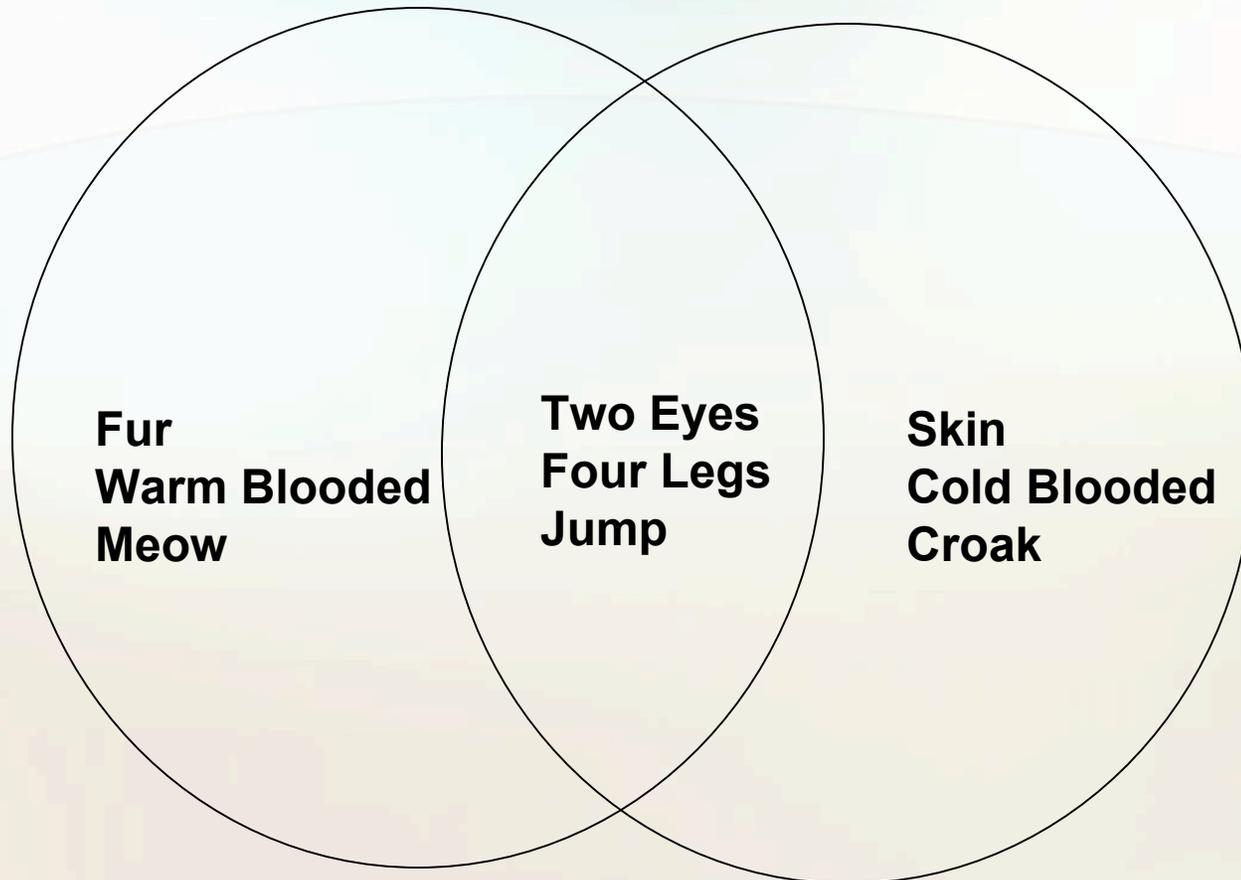
Useful when comparing and contrasting only two things



VENN DIAGRAM

Cats

Frogs



LIST

List qualities of each and then highlight shared qualities

Cats

2 eyes

4 legs

Fur

Meow

Jump

Warm blooded

Frogs

jump

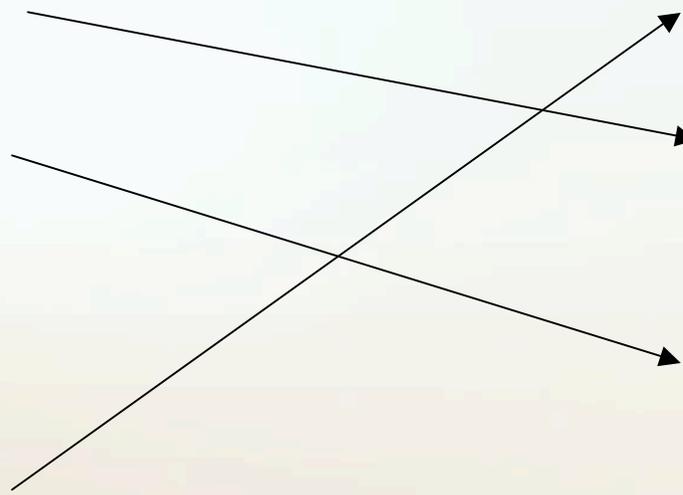
2 eyes

croak

4 legs

skin

Cold blooded



Comparing and contrasting multiple items or elements

Sometimes the assignment is more complicated – you are asked to discuss more than two things. For example, you are asked to compare and contrast the push-pull factors with various groups that have migrated to California. Using a table to brainstorm is more effective.

Break down the elements of the assignment

Determine the parts of the assignment:

1. Push-pull factors

- **economic**
- **political**
- **social**

2. Groups

- **African American**
- **Latino**
- **Asian**
- **European American**

Create a table and fill in the boxes

Highlight shared qualities

	Economic	Political	Social
African American			
Latino			
Asian			
European American			

ORGANIZATION

Once you have gathered all the specifics, organization is crucial in the paper. Otherwise you will either confuse or lose your reader.

First arrange your lists or tables in the order you want to present them. When discussing just two elements, decide whether to compare first or contrast first.

Emphatic Order

Order points from least to most important.

- **If the similarities are more significant, discuss differences first.**
- **If the differences are more significant, discuss similarities first.**

For Example:

- **If you are comparing/contrasting world religions and your conclusion will claim that, in essence, all religions give the same message, discuss the differences first.**
- **If you are comparing/contrasting a group of children and your conclusion will highlight their unique individuality, discuss the similarities first.**

Organizing from a List

For purposes of illustration, let's look at just the similarities in the two animals. Arrange the lists in the emphatic order.

Cats

2 eyes

4 legs

jump

Frogs

2 eyes

4 legs

jump

Order of Presentation

Choose a method, either:

one-side-at-a-time

or

point-by-point

One side at a time

First discuss everything about the cats
and then discuss everything about the frogs.
Keep the order of points the same in each.

Cats	Frogs
2 eyes	2 eyes
4 legs	4 legs
Jump	jump

Point by Point

Discuss each point, first cats, then frogs, alternating back and forth.
Keep the order consistent.
Always start with cats and then go to frogs.

Cats	Frogs
2eyes	2 eyes
4 legs	4 legs
jump	jump

With the more complicated assignment, first decide how you want to order the information, using emphatic order.

Would it be politics, economics and then social or social, politics, and then economics?

How would you order the different groups of people?

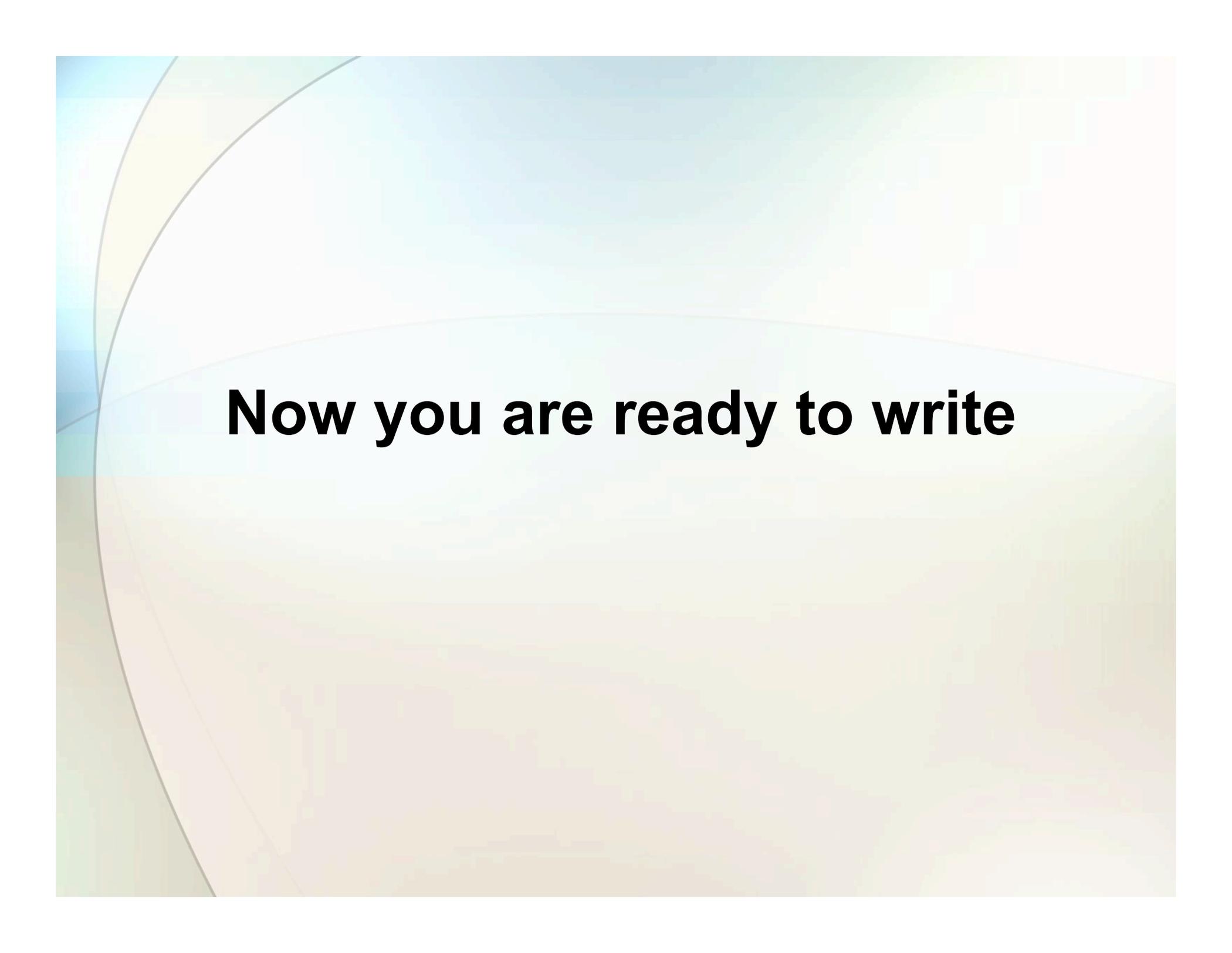
A table would use a combination of one side at a time and point by point.

To emphasize the push-pull factors:

	Economic	Political	Social
African American			
Latino			
Asian			
European American			

To emphasize the immigrating groups:

	Economic	Political	Social
African American			
Latino			
Asian			
European American			



Now you are ready to write

Introduction

Give the overall picture. Define the subject matter, give brief, all inclusive background and write a thesis statement that answers all the “so what?” questions.

Body Paragraphs

Follow your plan. Include a paragraph breakdown in your plan. Whether individual points warrant an entire body paragraph or certain points can be combined depends on the length of the paper (which dictates scope and depth). The order of the paragraphs depends on what you want to emphasize. Be sure to start and end body paragraphs with topic and concluding sentences.

Again, keep the order consistent. While discussing economics, first discuss

- African American, then**
- Latinos, then**
- Asians, then**
- Europeans Americans,**

and then follow the same order when discussing politics. This is known as parallel construction. Make decisions about the order *before* you start writing.

Conclusion

Look back at your introduction and thesis and again answer the “why do we care about this?” question in terms of the big picture. The conclusion will accentuate the lessons learned in the comparison and contrast of the elements. What is the new synthesis that has come out of this exercise?