Communication Strategies: Writing a Comparative Analysis

A comparative analysis compares two or more things: “two texts, two theories, two historical figures, two scientific processes, and so on” (Walk, 1998). A comparative analysis “may be about two similar things that have crucial differences (two pesticides with different effects on the environment) or two similar things that have crucial differences, yet turn out to have surprising commonalities (two politicians with vastly different world views who voice unexpectedly similar perspectives on sexual harassment).” Here are some guidelines on constructing a comparative analysis paper.

Making an Argument

A comparative analysis requires you to make an argument. Some describing or defining of the two elements will be necessary, but the heart of the paper comes with your argument about how they compare. Do not get stuck in only describing each element, push yourself into the work of making an argument about how the two compare (which involves drawing conclusions, analyzing, and synthesizing). Be sure you are drawing from the higher-order thinking skills in the Bloom’s Taxonomy, below (Bloom, 1956).

Constructing and Structuring the Paper

“To write a good compare-and-contrast paper, you must take your raw data—the similarities and differences you’ve observed—and make them cohere into a meaningful argument” (Walk, 1998). There are a few approaches to take:

Comparative Approaches

Basic Comparative Approach: weigh A and B equally
Lens Approach: weigh A less heavily than B, use A as a lens through which to view B
“Lens comparisons are useful for illuminating, critiquing, or challenging the stability of a thing that, before the analysis, seemed perfectly understood. Often, lens comparisons [often] take time into account: earlier texts, events, or historical figures may illuminate later ones, and vice versa” (Walk, 1998).

**Organizing the Paper**

“There are two basic ways to organize the body of your paper.

- In **text-by-text**, you discuss all of A, then all of B.
- In **point-by-point**, you alternate points about A with comparable points about B.

If you think that B extends A, you'll probably use a text-by-text scheme; if you see A and B engaged in debate, a point-by-point scheme will draw attention to the conflict. Be aware, however, that the point-by-point scheme can come off as a ping-pong game. You can avoid this effect by grouping more than one point together, thereby cutting down on the number of times you alternate from A to B. But no matter which organizational scheme you choose, you need not give equal time to similarities and differences. In fact, your paper will be more interesting if you get to the heart of your argument as quickly as possible” (Walk, 1998).

**Linking A and B**

“In a compare-and-contrast, the thesis depends on how the two things you've chosen to compare actually relate to one another. Do they extend, corroborate, complicate, contradict, correct, or debate one another” (Walk, 1998)? The introduction of your essay should include a clear thesis statement that places that comparative argument right up front.

“All argumentative papers require you to link each point in the argument back to the thesis. Without such links, your reader will be unable to see how new sections logically and systematically advance your argument. In a compare-and-contrast, you also need to make links between A and B in the body of your essay if you want your paper to hold together. To make these links, use transitional expressions of comparison and contrast (similarly, moreover, likewise, on the contrary, conversely, on the other hand)” (Walk, 1998). “You can use signal phrases like “another similarity” or “another difference.” If you are discussing both similarities and differences, you can use a signal phrase like “on the other hand” to show your move from comparison to contrast” (OWL at Purdue, 2011).

**Using a Frame of Reference**

A frame of reference is “the context within which you place the two things you plan to compare and contrast; it is the umbrella under which you have grouped them. The frame of reference may consist of an idea, theme, question, problem, or theory…The best frames of reference are constructed from specific sources rather than your own thoughts or observations…Most assignments tell you exactly what the frame of reference should be, and most courses supply sources for constructing it. If you encounter an assignment that fails to provide a frame of reference, you must come up with one on your own. A paper without such a context would have no angle on the material, no focus or frame for the writer to propose a meaningful argument” (Walk, 1998).