

Frequent Comparative Essay Mistakes

Teachers:

This document has two purposes in mind. It can be a tool to show your students what the most common errors are in writing a Compare & Contrast Essay, and it can also be used as a time saver while grading.

In my experience, most of the comments I make on my students' essays are the same handful of comments caused by the same handful of errors. As I write "Be more specific" for the umpteenth time I've often thought it would be nice to have a "stamp" that would say, "This essay suffers from common mistakes #2, #5, & #6." Rather than reinvent the wheel with each and every paper, I thought, "What if students had a list of the most common mistakes? Then I could just write a comment that says, "Mistakes #3 & #7.

I DON'T want to suggest that we should treat students or their essays in an impersonal, "assembly line" mentality. I strive to write customized comments on every essay, but hopefully this tool might both help the quality of your students' writing, and reduce the time you spend grading.

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Question: Compare how rulers in any TWO of the following ancient societies used culture (e.g. law, language, literature, religion, & art) to help unify their political power.

Shang & Zhou China

Vedic India

Mesopotamia

Egypt

Category	Mistake		Example	How to Fix It
1 Thesis	1A	No Thesis		Pre-writing organization. Read the question, then plan/outline your response <u>before</u> you begin to write.
	1B	Thesis not related to the question	<i>Modern China's govern--ment shares much in common with its ancient predecessor.</i>	Focus on the language of the question: <u>verbs</u> , <u>adjectives</u> , and <u>time frame</u> . Analyze ≠ Describe ≠ Justify ≠ Trace. If the question asks about <u>economic</u> issues, make sure you confine your response to economics. If it asks about 1450-1750, don't write about 1375 or 1800.
	1C	Thesis repeats or just paraphrases the question	<i>There were many similarities between ancient Mesopotamia and India.</i>	"Many" is a virtually meaningless qualifier. Be more specific! Try to "argue" your thesis. Could you take an "opposite" position? If not, then the thesis doesn't really <i>say</i> anything.
	1D	Thesis is too vague	<i>Ancient India's and Egypt's government were both similar and different.</i>	Avoid the "thesis killer" words ¹ (very, many, things, a lot, big, large, huge, etc.). Remember all those SAT vocabulary words you've been learning in English class? Here's your chance to use 'em!

Category	Mistake		How to Fix It
2 Parts of the Question	2A	Body paragraphs unrelated to question or thesis	Pre-writing organization and planning. Careful reading of the question.
	2B	Paragraphs unbalanced, don't answer all parts of the question	

¹ I have a rule in my classroom, "Any thesis that contains the words 'very,' 'many,' 'things,' 'lots,' or 'stuff' is automatically vetoed." Possibly the hardest skill to learn is the ability to form a sophisticated, complex thesis. One trick I've learned (from Geri McCarthy of Barrington, RI) is to require students to begin their thesis with either "While", "Although", or "Despite/In spite of." These words strongly encourage students to formulate a mature thesis that helps structure the rest of their essay. Once students can consistently formulate a competent thesis sentence, then I concentrate on having them develop an essay preview/outline of later paragraphs. The result should be a thesis paragraph that is several sentences long (the paragraph should NOT just be a single sentence).

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3 Evidence	3A	No specific evidence <i>There were many things that the Egyptians did to politically unify their empire.</i>	Name those “many things” or your teacher will write “There are many reasons why this essay didn’t receive a higher score.”
	3B	Evidence given unrelated to question/thesis.	Pr-writing planning and organization. Think of the essay question as a courtroom trial. “Egypt and Mesopotamia are accused of being similar.” Pretend that you are the prosecuting/defense attorney and have to show <i>evidence</i> to convince a jury that that statement is true/false. History is part fact, part interpretation. It is entirely possible that another student is using the SAME examples you’re using, but interpreting them as evidence toward a contradictory conclusion. Have you made an honest attempt to “convince” your reader of your interpretation of history?
	3C	Evidence imbalanced vis a vis all parts of the question <i>Egypt, Egypt, Egypt.</i> (Nothing about Mesopotamia) or <i>Politics, Politics, Politics,</i> (nothing about religion) or <i>Similarity, Similarity, Similarity</i> (nothing about differences)	Make sure to check over your outline and see what the weak spots are.
	3D	Insufficient quantity of Evidence	“Rule of 3.” ² Give three examples of each category.

² This illustrates an important teaching point. This rubric is designed to spell out the bare minimum that students must do to get a point when the national exam is graded. In the classroom, teachers should aim higher. Ideally, students should do every part of this rubric to every question or document they ever read. That is part of the teacher’s responsibility in training students in the historian’s craft. So how many POV’s, Content Analyses, etc. should students aim for? College Board Consultant Bard Keeler’s advice is the “Rule of 3.” No matter what the category, give three examples. 3 POV’s, 3 Content Analyses, 3 pieces of evidence, 3 similarities & 3 differences (for Compare & Contrast essays) 3 Changes & 3 Continuities (for the COT essay) etc. This “Rule of 3” not only helps students earn full credit for Evidence, but also requires students to Address all Parts of the Question (Point #2).

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4 Direct Comparisons	4A No comparisons at all.		<p>Did you structure your essay according to the “Geographic Lump” or the “Categorical Split”?³ If you used the “Lump,” then you probably forgot to <i>directly</i> compare each characteristic in the second region/ paragraph back to the same characteristic in the first region/paragraph.</p> <p>It could be a simple fix, like <i>Egypt had one pharoah, while Mesopotamia had several competing kings.</i> (Substitute a comma for the period, and add “while.”)</p>																	
	4B Parallel construction, (comparison implied, not explicit)	<p><i>Egypt had one pharoah. Mesopotamia had several competing kings.</i></p> <p>Or</p> <p><i>“This happened here. That happened there.”</i></p> <p>(So what? Where’s the direct comparison?)</p>	<p>It could also require a more complex solution, like restructuring your entire essay along the lines of the “Categorical Split” so as to encourage more direct comparisons.</p> <p><i>Common comparison/contrast “Cue” Words</i></p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td>also</td> <td>as well</td> <td>both</td> <td>shared</td> </tr> <tr> <td>in addition</td> <td>like</td> <td>similarly</td> <td>too</td> </tr> <tr> <td>however</td> <td>on the other hand</td> <td>conversely</td> <td>unlike</td> <td>differently</td> </tr> <tr> <td>disagree</td> <td>in opposition to</td> <td>either</td> <td>while</td> <td>in contrast</td> </tr> </table>	also	as well	both	shared	in addition	like	similarly	too	however	on the other hand	conversely	unlike	differently	disagree	in opposition to	either	while
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5 Analysis	5A No analysis	<p>Think of history as a giant jigsaw puzzle, except that this jigsaw puzzle’s pieces are all the same shape, so you can put them together in any way you like and make any “big picture” you want.</p> <p>The individual pieces are historical “facts.” The <i>way</i> you put them together is your <i>interpretation</i> of the facts.</p>
	5B Analysis not detailed enough	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which pieces of history do you think are the most important or significant? • Why does your interpretation reflect the complexities of reality better than any other interpretation? • What other reasonable ways might someone else put together the pieces?

³ See C&C Essay Organization Structures Table on page 5

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Comparative Essay Organizational Structures

Most students have been writing Compare and Contrast essays for several years, but often don't understand how to structure/organize their essay. Ellen Bell, an AP World History Consultant from Houston, TX has analyzed the overall structure of common Compare and Contrast essays. Her notes below (with my *italicized comments*) can help virtually every aspect of students' writing.

Geographic “Lump”	Similarities and Differences	Categorical “Split”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thesis • Body paragraph 1—region 1 Political Economic Social⁴ • Body paragraph 2—region 2 Political Economic Social <p>Note: When writing body paragraph 2 you MUST make comparisons and contrasts back to information in body paragraph 1.</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thesis • Body paragraph 1—similarities between regions Political Economic Social • Body paragraph 2—differences between regions Political Economic Social <p>Note: There may not be similarities and differences in all three categories.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thesis <u>Paragraph</u> (chooses 3 categories: e.g. political, economic, and social) • Body paragraph 1 <u>Political</u> (similarities AND differences between BOTH regions) • Body paragraph 2 <u>Economic</u> (similarities AND differences between BOTH regions) • Body paragraph 3 <u>Social</u> (similarities AND differences in BOTH regions)
<p><i>This is the most common (and usually least effective) structure students use. While it CAN work effectively, all too often students forget or fail to make <u>direct</u> comparisons between the regions. (Most comparisons are implied, at best.) Frequently, students are so eager to begin writing they fail to adequately develop their thesis. Also, there's nothing in the overall structure that inherently encourages analysis.</i></p>	<p><i>Students are more likely to initially feel comfortable listing similarities and differences, so this structure might be less intimidating than the Categorical Split.</i></p> <p><i>Good analysis though is more likely to come <u>if/when</u> students proceed to the next level of categorization (political, economic, social, etc).</i></p>	<p><i>Effective pre-writing is vitally important. The Categorical Split structure requires students to spend considerable time planning their thesis and organization. Because the thesis contains categories, it is usually more sophisticated and often automatically helps structure later paragraphs. It may even be good enough for “extra credit” (Expanded Core). Students are more likely to include <u>analysis</u> and numerous direct comparisons. In short, there's nothing like a strong thesis to help everything else.</i></p>

⁴ The “political, economic, and social” categories are illustrative only. Obviously, if the question called for religious, cultural, and technological evidence then those categories would apply.