

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 may be harder than you think. It can seem pretty straightforward to compare theme (or setting, or character, etc.) in several works of literature, but a simple descriptive comparison is NOT effective. Such an essay should address a meaningful focus that goes beyond a superficial comparison to a thoughtful examination of the works.

What is the difference between a “superficial comparison” and a “meaningful 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 not only merely describes the comparison; it is completely unspecific. Basically, 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. 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 much more specific than number one, 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 thinking, “*So what?*” 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.*

- Yes! Thesis number three is an effective focus for comparison analysis. 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 it's *analysis* to note that *despite* their apparent differences, both poems “communicate their ideas” in chiefly similar ways.

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.

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