

# Scaffolding a Compare and Contrast Essay

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Compare and contrast writing should be a mainstay in our curricula. Research on compare and contrast strongly favors this instructional strategy. Of the nine instructional strategies discussed in *Classroom Instruction That Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement* (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001), identifying similarities and differences is the single most-effective instructional strategy (p. 7). But comparing and contrasting is a complex process. The series of steps below makes it easier for teachers and students by guiding them through a scaffolding process useful in any content area. Once learned, the steps can lead to an information-rich, multi-paragraph essay.

## Prepare

- ✓ Identify two or more items to compare and contrast and insert them into the top row of the grid.
- ✓ Create the Critical Characteristics by having students individually brainstorm for characteristics, qualities, traits, and so forth of each item to be compared.
- ✓ In small groups, have students share their list of characteristics, with each group selecting the best 4–6 characteristics. Students should try to select characteristics that are mutually exclusive.
- ✓ Review suggested characteristics from each group, and have the class agree on 3–6 for the grid.
- ✓ Record the Critical Characteristics on the grid in the first column on the left.

## Generate Ideas

- ✓ Have students individually fill in the grid by using their background knowledge.
- ✓ In small groups, students share their individual grids and combine them to create one grid that represents what their group knows or understands.
- ✓ Using a whiteboard, SMART Board, or other display, combine the small group grids into a class compare and contrast grid.
- ✓ At this point, students who did not have information to contribute now have a fully developed grid to use.

## Build a Paragraph

- ✓ Each student selects one characteristic and develops the information into a detail-rich paragraph. Make sure that every characteristic is selected and developed by at least a few students so you will have a paragraph for each characteristic.
- ✓ Three basic criteria for the paragraph should include:
  - Topic sentence that identifies the chosen characteristic
  - A specific number of details or facts about each of the items or topics being compared
  - A concluding sentence that sums up the similarities and differences

## Pair Up and Peer Edit

- ✓ Students pair up with someone who selected a **different** characteristic and peer edit for the three criteria. This step exposes students to a wide range of characteristics. Or students pair up with someone who selected the **same** characteristic and peer edit for the three criteria to expose them to a deeper understanding of the chosen characteristic.
- ✓ Select the best paragraph written about each characteristic and arrange them into a multi-paragraph essay.

## Write Introduction and Conclusion Paragraphs

- ✓ Depending on the time available, individual students or the class together could write an introduction, conclusion, or both.

When the process is complete, all students will have created a compare and contrast grid to organize information, written at least one body paragraph, and possibly an introduction or conclusion. By completing the grid, students have the opportunity to organize information. When they complete a paragraph based on one characteristic, they practice synthesizing ideas into a detail-rich paragraph. Following this procedure, students will eventually be able to write a multi-paragraph compare and contrast essay on their own.