

WRITING COMPARATIVE ESSAYS

The challenges entailed in writing comparative essays are best tackled by focusing first on questions about why one writes comparative essays and then on questions about how one writes effective ones. The why questions will be answered differently depending on which of the two types of essays you're interested in writing.

- Essays of the first type—the straightforward comparison of two or more texts in terms of some theme or issue or element—tend to be written to show exactly what differentiates two similar texts, what makes each unique.
- Essays of the second type, however, tend to be much more focused on the similarities that define a given literary kind, what makes a given set of texts alike enough to be considered members of a certain group or part of a certain whole (for example, initiation stories or books that fall into a specific genre like dystopia or science fiction).

Asking Comparative Questions

In the case of the straightforward comparison assignment, follow this helpful exercise:

- Read each of your texts at least once, underlining quotations in each that seem significant. As you read, work not only to understand the individual texts but also to identify the similarities and differences among them, identifying both the things that link them and the things that distinguish and individualize each.
- Once you have finished, think more about these similarities and differences, working to answer the following questions as if you were trying to capture for someone who hadn't read your texts the essence of each. You may also want to make notes about the quotations you underlined that might illustrate or support your claims.
 - How would you describe each text's speaker or narrator? What makes them alike? What (internal and external) characteristics do they share? What makes them different? What (internal and external) characteristics differentiate them?
 - How would you describe the central problems or conflicts in the texts? How, exactly, are the problems and conflicts alike and different?
 - How would you describe the resolutions to these conflicts offered in the texts? In what ways are those resolutions alike? In what ways are they different?
 - What themes or issues are articulated or tackled in these texts? How are the themes alike? How do they differ?
 - How would you describe the plot or structure of the two texts? What's alike and different? How does this structure carry forward the main themes in the texts?
 - How would you describe the significance and role of the setting or environment (social, cultural, and/or physical)? How is the role that setting plays in the two texts alike and different?
 - What's the overall tone or mood of these texts—the feelings they tend to evoke? How do they do so? How, specifically, are the tones or moods of your stories alike? How are they different?
- Taking all these factors into account and without referring to any particulars, use this sheet of paper to narrate, outline, script out, or draw a map or flowchart that captures the basic features, elements, and so on of each of your texts and of the relationship between them. Use this map or flowchart to help structure your analysis.