

CHAPTER 4: COMPARISON & CONTRAST

This chapter emphasizes connections between critical thinking and comparison. It maps important techniques for creating comparisons:



- How to distinguish comparisons from other types of writing
- Ways to identify the key features of comparisons in writing
- Engaging in critical thinking while writing a comparison
- Crafting a successful comparison by using a set of planning steps
- Recognizing that the categories for comparison are always selected on the basis of values, beliefs, and needs

People make choices: what car to buy, who to vote for, what bend in the river to fish, what song to download, what advice to ignore, who to marry. The list of choices is long because life requires decisions about what matters and what does not. Most people have made lists of differences and similarities to guide a decision. That is a practical technique for simple problems. The bigger choices in life may begin with a simple list, but good comparisons require more than a list. If you learn to make conscious comparisons, you will make better decisions and write more effectively.

KEY FEATURES OF COMPARISONS

Comparisons range from the simple to the complex. Writers can compare hamburgers to hotdogs, or they can use statistical tools to compare treatments for breast cancer. Both are comparisons, but they have important differences based on the needs of the audience, the objects compared, and the writer's purpose.

Comparisons and Contrasts

Writers look at similarities, and they also look at differences. Often, the similarities and differences enable them to make judgments, insights, and discoveries. For example, if Carlos is tall and Joshua is short, the contrast seems real. Although the difference is important, we need to ask why it is important. To a basketball coach, the reasons are obvious. Being tall is an advantage. Given only the facts about their height, the coach would probably want to recruit the Carlos. The idea of contrast seems useful.

On the other hand, the coach might say, “Aha! These two players are part of the issue of height-in-basketball. There is always a tradeoff between height, speed, and coordination. I have to remember that both have height, but I have to relate height to other issues.” At this point, the players share a feature. If the feature matters, then they are different and it is a contrast; if the feature doesn’t matter in relation to other things, then it is a comparison. The difference in whether or not height matters depends on the needs of the audience. In this chapter, both similarities and differences are called “comparisons” because it encourages critical thinking about *shared* criteria.

Simple Comparisons and Complex Comparisons

1. Simple Comparisons: comparisons often solve simple problems -- Coke or Pepsi? There is no need for new criteria, and the writer does not need to make a complex analysis. Such comparisons help make simple recommendations. Their emphasis is on the *outcome* of the comparison. However, a simple comparison can lead to more complex discoveries.
2. Complex Comparisons: complex comparisons also analyze the beliefs and values behind a criterion. Such comparisons lead to the choice between medical treatments, the selection of a college major, the design for solar panels, and other high-level decisions. Understanding the values, beliefs, and assumptions that have created the criteria is typical of the comparisons found in research and scholarship.

Using Comparison to Think Critically

All comparisons involve activities that are already familiar:

1. *Mapping the existing knowledge about the items being compared*
 - a. Identify key features of each item
 - b. Identify the existing criteria for comparisons
 - c. Identify the values and beliefs behind the existing criteria

2. *Discovering the blanks in the existing map*
 - a. Discover important criteria that *are not* being used to create a relationship between the things being compared
 - b. Identify the values and beliefs that would make these criteria important

3. *Re-drawing the map:*
 - a. Apply both the old and the new criteria
 - b. State the values and beliefs that have been discovered
 - c. Evaluate what the new criteria make important
 - d. Apply both the old and the new criteria to create a judgment or insight

A good comparison is like any other kind of writing. It maps what is already known. It finds the blanks in the map, and then it re-draws the map. The new map has a new insight that explains how the differences and similarities matter to a specific audience.

Comparisons Use Values and Beliefs

Good criteria help readers understand what matters. That is why a comparison is more than a list of differences and similarities. For example, one writer can compare dozens of cars on their technical features. However, a second writer might have friends who are unemployed automotive workers. This writer will probably pay attention to where each car is built. A third writer who lives in Los Angeles, Atlanta, or New York may find pollution a major problem. This writer may judge that the exhaust emissions of a car are important. Values create the criteria for comparison, and each writer will have a different recommendation. Stating the values behind the criteria enables the reader to make an independent choice.

Putting Comparison to Work:

Imagine that you are buying a new car, and you want to compare five mid-sized, mid-priced cars. Do the following:

1. Select five automobiles to compare.
2. Create a list of criteria that focuses only on technical aspects of the cars.
3. Create a second list of criteria that reflects the connection of cars to employment in the U.S.
4. Create a third list of criteria that reflects the environmental impact of cars.
5. Apply each set of criteria to the list of automobiles in #1.
6. Explain the effect of the different criteria on the outcome of the comparison.

USING COMPARISON FOR CRITICAL THINKING

Recently, a community college wanted to know why students failed or succeeded. Counselors, professors, and administrators knew that the students at the college were different from students who went directly to a university. The school had two systems for identifying students who needed extra help, so they decided make a comparison. One system came from a large company, and the other system had been created by asking students about the things that interfered with college. The college decided to compare the two screening tests *and* to pay close attention to the assumptions behind each test.

How the College Used Comparisons to Predict Students' Success

The first screening test in the comparison was from ACT, Inc. The company sells tests that try to predict academic success and failure. The college looked at the ACT ENGAGE screening tool. It tests for a variety of personality traits. These personality traits -- according to ACT -- predict success or failure in college. Here is how the company describes the ENGAGE test:

Domain	ENGAGE Scale	Definition
Motivation & Skills Personal characteristics that help students to succeed academically by focusing and maintaining energies on goal-directed activities.	Academic Discipline	The amount of effort a student puts into schoolwork and the degree to which a student sees him-herself as hardworking and conscientious.
	General Determination	The extent to which one strives to follow through on commitments and obligations.
	Goal Striving	The strength of one's efforts to achieve objectives and end goals.
	Commitment to College	Commitment to staying in college and getting a degree.
	Study Skills	The extent to which students believe they know how to assess an academic problem, organize a solution, and successfully complete academic assignments.
	Communication Skills	Attentiveness to others' feelings and flexibility in resolving conflicts with others.
Social Engagement Interpersonal factors that influence students' successful integration or adaptation into their environment.	Social Connection	One's feelings of connection and involvement with the school community.
	Social Activity	One's comfort in meeting and interacting with other people.
Self-Regulation Cognitive and affective processes used to monitor, regulate, and control behavior related to learning.	Academic Self-Confidence	The belief in one's ability to perform well in school.
	Steadiness	One's responses to and management of strong feelings.

http://www.act.org/engage/college_features.html (accessed 9 September 2011)

The “ENGAGE Scale” names the company’s criteria for predicting a student’s success. These criteria identify students’ differences and similarities. If students have high levels of certain traits,

they are more likely to stay in college and succeed. The ACT test creates profiles for identifying at-risk students. Thus, the test seems useful, but it might not ask the questions that matter most at the community college.

The test has been created to identify differences. What is “different” between the two groups is shown by differences in their test scores. The school can use the tests, look at the results, and create programs to help at-risk students. The school can then design programs that will help the students.

Scholars know that developing useful criteria is a fine art. The criteria require constant re-examination because each group can have smaller groups within them. These smaller groups might be different from the overall patterns. The college suspects that the ENGAGE test might not recognize how its own students are different. Thus, it wants to compare the ENGAGE test to one based on interviews with its own students.

To create a second system, the community college asked *students* about what interfered with their success. The criteria *they* proposed for measuring differences between successful and failing students were radically different from the ENGAGE test:

	Failing Students	Successful Students
Financial Pressures		
Total costs beyond support (out of pocket) for education		
If you have a disability, do you get financial aid?		
Do you purchase tutoring assistance?		
Family		
Describe your child care arrangement		
Are you a single parent?		
Name your race/ethnicity/gender/sexual orientation		
Work		
Working full time?		
Working part time; seeking full time?		
Unemployed but seeking work?		
Collecting unemployment?		
Unemployment has run out?		
How many jobs do you hold?		
Transportation		
Is your schedule dependent on what someone else does for their schedule, e.g., parent's transportation takes precedence over yours?		
Do you have your own car?		
Plans		
Are you planning to transfer to another school?		
Education History		
How long since previously in school?		
Prior education: degree received		
Clarity of the registration process: were there any problems? List them.		
Have you found that your race/ethnicity/gender/sexual orientation leads to different (negative) treatment in the classroom?		
Education Goals:		
When do you expect to graduate?		
How long is your program?		
How long will it take you to graduate?		
How much time do you have available to study on a typical day?		
Home While Growing Up:		
Divorced parents?		
Deceased parent(s)		
Single parent?		
Married parents?		
Foster child?		
Are you the first of your family to go to college?		
How many houses/apartments have you lived in prior to coming to college?		

Students developed this list of factors. Their list suggests that they see success as controlled by external forces. They see raising children, paying the rent, finding transportation, working long hours, cooking meals, and other duties as the things that affect success. Their list focuses on the outside world that makes up their lives. The students named a set of *social* forces that affect success. By contrast, the ENGAGE criteria focus on *individual* strength, commitment, and attitudes.

Findings

Comparisons solve problems, and they do it by carefully building terms that discover meaningful differences and similarities. There is no obvious choice. The ENGAGE researchers can cite detailed data that justify their criteria. On the other hand, no criteria are ever complete. The community college has two tests that claim to do the same thing. Comparing the two tests will involve tracking groups of students, recording academic performance, and making judgments about the meaning of the differences. Comparisons begin with an identification of values and beliefs. “Failure” and “success” acquire a meaning when they are put in context.

These two sets of criteria remind readers that comparisons are based on values and beliefs. If comparisons have values and beliefs built into their criteria, then writers have to also create their own comparisons with a clear understanding of their own values and beliefs. The danger is that comparisons may seem obvious and natural. They are not, and it is the writer's job to be honest about the basis for the comparisons. Sometimes there is no need to examine them; Coke or Pepsi is not an earthshaking decision. But for important issues, writers have to recognize the value systems written into the document's insight.

Putting Comparison to Work

1. Notice that the students' list has headings: financial pressures, family, work, transportation, educational history, educational plans, family history, growing up, etc. These questions create a map. Should any of these be combined or divided further? If so, which ones?
2. List the criteria in order of importance *to you*, and then name one or more additional criteria that you would use to compare successful and failing students.
3. Review the list of criteria from ACT and from the students. Explain the following:

- a. Why do students emphasize the *external* (social) forces that prevent success?
- b. Why does the ACT emphasize the *internal* (psychological) qualities that lead to success?
- c. What do the differences tell us about differences between the people who design ACT tests and the students who designed their own list?

Once you have recognized that these two sets of criteria are different, you can compare the two systems. You can ask a question that affects students:

How Context Affects Comparison

What do the differences between the two lists tell us about the way educators think about academic success and failure?

Good comparisons offer a clear answer to the “So what?” that readers ask. Students might ask, “Why should my school pay more attention to ACT scientists than to us?” That is a fair question. The college might say, “The people at ACT are experts in this field.” But the contrast between the scientists and the students really illustrates the importance of point of view. Both matter, but it’s important to recognize how the education, experience, and values of each group causes them to construct different criteria. It is no surprise that each set of criteria is based on their own concerns. This is *not* about who is “right” and who is “wrong.” It is about understanding how explanations are created.

HOW TO CREATE A COMPARISON

Select Comparable Objects

Comparisons begin with a need. We need to choose a major, decide to apply for a specific job, perform a valid statistical analysis of breast cancer treatments. These all require comparisons. They range from the mundane to the life-saving. When we compare things, we have to use terms that matter. Real knowledge is the launching pad for real questions. For example, there is no point in comparing Tamoxifen and aspirin for treating breast cancer because the alternatives do not

both reflect an expert understanding of cancer treatments. A writer needs to know that Tamoxifen is a chemical with a statistically measurable effect on breast cancer survival, and aspirin has no history of such an effect. It would be more useful to compare Tamoxifen and another drug with a promising history of effectiveness. Knowing what to compare comes from mapping the subject. A good comparison requires knowledge of the clinically verified treatment alternatives for cancer. Without this contextualizing knowledge, the comparison is the equivalent of comparing avocados and bicycles. These two things have nothing in common. The result is obvious; there is no comparison. At best, this is inept. At worst, it is dishonest and prevents research from going forward.

Know the Needs of Your Audience

Key words alert readers to the presence of a comparison. Comparisons frequently use the following terms:

Differences	Similarities
on the other hand	in similar fashion or similarly
however	likewise/like
but	in the same way
although	as well
unlike	both
in contrast	also
differs from	is similar to
while	resembles
yet	too

Remember to use these to create comparisons and as signs that a comparison is in progress. After finding objects to compare, the writer has to have useful criteria for building the comparison. Some of these come from the needs of the audience. For example, if the comparison helps the reader choose between two automobiles, the writer has to know what the reader needs. How many people will be riding in it? If they are traveling 97 miles to get to work at a job that pays \$25,000 per year, mileage will probably matter. The differences can lead to an insightful understanding of automotive transportation and the values it reflects, especially when those values are directly stated as a key feature of the comparison. A useful comparison goes far beyond saying, “Buy a four-cylinder Doofus,” or “Buy an electric Edsel” because it explains the strengths and limitations of the insight.

Select from Two Basic Organizational Strategies

Comparisons can be organized in two basic ways. One is called *point-by-point*. The other is called *block*. Each produces a different effect, and each has its advantages and disadvantages.

Consider the following when choosing a comparison strategy:

1. *Point-by-Point*: The writer first applies one criterion to one object. For example, the writer might first discuss the gas mileage of a Prius. Then, the writer applies the criterion to the other object. For example, the writer then discusses the mileage of a Volt. The document goes back and forth between the objects being compared. The criteria control the sequence of topics in the paper. The writer concludes by making judgments and insights about the two cars.

Note: this method can be useful for a longer paper because the reader will need reminders about the other item being compared. Both items remain in play throughout the document.

2. *Block*: The second type of organization begins with a complete discussion of only one item. This section uses all the criteria. When that is finished, the comparison turns to the other item in the comparison. This method makes the objects themselves seem most important, and they control the paper. It works well for short documents.

Note: writers can organize a paper this way so that one item in the comparison serves as a means of understanding the other. The first item dominates because it is often more familiar to the reader. Thus, it enables her/him to understand the second item.

These strategies are similar to the choice of key terms. They let the reader know that the paper is a comparison. More important is that the cues and the organization set an expectation that the comparison will provide an insight.

What Kinds of Critical Thinking do Readers Expect?

When writers present differences and similarities, the reader asks the key question: “So what?” If the paper does not include an answer to that question, the comparison is incomplete. The paper can answer the “So what?” question in four different ways:

1. The answer provides an evaluation.
2. The answer can organize the criteria into larger categories. Then, it can discuss how the categories satisfy the needs of the reader.
3. The answer can develop a better description of the readers’ needs that make the comparison useful.
4. The answer can use the differences and similarities to discuss the values and beliefs that make the compared objects “mean” different things to different people.

Sometimes, it almost seems as if a list of differences and similarities will be the comparison. Such lists are not completed comparisons. They are initial steps toward a comparison.

THREE EXAMPLES OF COMPARISON

One way to write good comparisons is to look at examples. The first example below is a poor example. The next two comparisons are good examples. They show how to think critically about the way we make judgements. Remember that the processes of reading and writing are a two-way street. Good writers are good thinkers who can travel in either direction.

Example #1: A Comparison That Forgets to Answer the “So what?”

The example below is not really a comparison. It attempts to compare refrigerators, and the reader expects some sort of recommendation or insight. Instead, there is only a list of similarities and differences. Even though this is a flawed comparison, it does illustrate the writer’s responsibility to answer the reader’s “So what?” that always comes after facts have been presented.

<p>There are many types of refrigerators, and they do not have identical features. These differences are important, and they are the basis for comparing the choices available to shoppers. The differences have been summarized in a chart provided by a consumer agency. The differences show the variety of products available.</p>	<p>These sentences do not tell the reader anything new. They say, “Hey, there are a lot of refrigerators out there, and guess what? They’re not all the same.” Just because the differences can be listed, the list is not a comparison. It does not include an insight about the choices, the values the choices represent, or the need for other criteria.</p>																																																																	
<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Features</th> <th>Maytag M1TXEMMWW</th> <th>LG LBC22520SW</th> <th>Samsung RF266AEWP</th> <th>Kenmore Cold Spot 59422</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>UPC</td> <td>883049155272</td> <td>048231782555</td> <td>036725515949</td> <td>883049132570</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Total Volume (cubic feet)</td> <td>21</td> <td>22.4</td> <td>26</td> <td>25.1</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Annual Energy Consumption (kilowatt hours)</td> <td>416</td> <td>465</td> <td>462</td> <td>577</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Refrigerator Type</td> <td>Top freezer</td> <td>Bottom freezer</td> <td>French door</td> <td>Side-by-side</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Controls / Display</td> <td>Knob/dial</td> <td>Digital temperature controls</td> <td>Electronic controls</td> <td>Knob / dial</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Defrost</td> <td>Frost-free</td> <td>Frost-free</td> <td>Frost-free</td> <td>Frost-free</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Dispenser</td> <td>Cubed ice</td> <td>No</td> <td>Cubed ice, crushed ice, filtered water</td> <td>Filtered water, cubed and crushed ice</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Door Opens</td> <td>Reversible</td> <td>Reversible</td> <td>Left and right</td> <td>Left and right</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Exterior Color</td> <td>White</td> <td>White</td> <td>White</td> <td>White</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Other Available Colors</td> <td>Bisque, black, stainless steel</td> <td>Black, stainless steel</td> <td>Black, stainless steel, platinum</td> <td>Black</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Extra Features</td> <td>Gallon door storage</td> <td>Door alarm, adjustable door storage, antibacterial seal</td> <td>Twin cooling system, power freeze/cool</td> <td>PUR water filtration, Microban-treated crispers</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Freezer Volume (cubic feet)</td> <td>6.5</td> <td>6.9</td> <td>8.1</td> <td>9.9</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Features	Maytag M1TXEMMWW	LG LBC22520SW	Samsung RF266AEWP	Kenmore Cold Spot 59422	UPC	883049155272	048231782555	036725515949	883049132570	Total Volume (cubic feet)	21	22.4	26	25.1	Annual Energy Consumption (kilowatt hours)	416	465	462	577	Refrigerator Type	Top freezer	Bottom freezer	French door	Side-by-side	Controls / Display	Knob/dial	Digital temperature controls	Electronic controls	Knob / dial	Defrost	Frost-free	Frost-free	Frost-free	Frost-free	Dispenser	Cubed ice	No	Cubed ice, crushed ice, filtered water	Filtered water, cubed and crushed ice	Door Opens	Reversible	Reversible	Left and right	Left and right	Exterior Color	White	White	White	White	Other Available Colors	Bisque, black, stainless steel	Black, stainless steel	Black, stainless steel, platinum	Black	Extra Features	Gallon door storage	Door alarm, adjustable door storage, antibacterial seal	Twin cooling system, power freeze/cool	PUR water filtration, Microban-treated crispers	Freezer Volume (cubic feet)	6.5	6.9	8.1	9.9	<p>The chart is a map of what others have said. There is no examination of the map for omitted information, errors, or other opportunities for insight. Copying-and-pasting the chart is an open admission that the writer has no intention of re-drawing the map. Without such critical thinking, the paper is <i>not</i> a comparison.</p>
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<p>These differences tell a lot about the choices shoppers have. Manufacturers offer many products to choose from, and you can choose whatever serves your needs.</p>	<p>The paper has no conclusion. It only says that different things are . . . different. That is not enough. The responsibility for critical thinking has been shifted to the reader.</p>																																																																	

What does this example tell us about comparison?



Writers who create comparisons must provide an insight for the reader. The writer is not just a compiler of facts that can be thrust under the nose of the reader. The next example shows how a student has used a TEQ Sheet, a Purpose & Problem Statement, and a Prospectus to build a real comparison that relies on critical thinking.

Example #2: A Useful Comparison that Uses Three Planning Steps

Useful comparisons often discover criteria. Good comparisons see what others ignore. They can help identify hidden values attached to the criteria. Thus, a good comparison expands the readers’ thinking. For example, choosing an automobile can be a mechanical choice based on summing up differences in mileage, acceleration, and options. For a comparison assignment in a

first-year course, a student wrote about two cars she was considering. She had narrowed her choice, but she wanted to go beyond the obvious criteria and ask other questions. In the process, she not only selected a car, but also understood some of the values that were often ignored in comparisons of cars. Her work starts below:

The student started out by getting an online chart that described two cars:

	2011 Chevrolet Cruze LTZ SEDAN 1LZ  MSRP ¹ : \$22,225 Competitively Equipped: \$22,975 <input type="button" value="Change Vehicle"/>	2012 Ford Focus 5dr HB Titanium  MSRP ² : \$22,700 Competitively Equipped: \$23,495 <input type="button" value="Change Vehicle"/> Remove
Powertrain		
Standard Engine	Turbocharged Gas I4	Gas I4
Displacement	1.4L/83	2.0L/121
Drivetrain	Front wheel drive	Front Wheel Drive
Horsepower @ RPM	138 @ 4900	160 @ 6500
Torque @ RPM	148 @ 1850	146 @ 4450
Fuel Injection	Direct Injection	DI
4-Wheel ABS	Standard	Standard
4- wheel Disc Brakes	Standard	Standard

<http://www.chevrolet.com/tools/comparator/compareVehicle.do?modelYear=2012&makeName=13&modelID=21067&selectedTrim=330547&year=2011&pvc=12238&comparisonVehicles=330547~309339~315776&sValue=&snType=model>

The student began by assuming that other criteria might be important. She wanted a way to discover them, so she used the Terms, Expectations, & Questions Sheet (TEQ Sheet). She knew that the sheet would help her identify what others had already said. It would also help her discover what was being ignored. She wanted to see if additional criteria would improve her decision.

Understanding an Existing Map

Terms/Expectations/Questions: THE TEQ SHEET

Complete Citation:

<http://www.chevrolet.com/tools/comparator/compareVehicle.do?modelYear=2012&makeName=13&modelID=21067&selectedTrim=330547&year=2011&pvc=12238&comparisonVehicles=330547~309339~315776&sValue=&snType=model>

Terms and Phrases

To make its claim, the source uses important concepts. These organize the evidence and make sense out of it. **Identify** four key terms or phrases that are especially important to the source's claim. **Explain** why each is important to the source's claim.

1. Standard Features: these are the features that are found in all cars of that type. This collection of features makes them seem responses to "natural" customer needs.
2. Fuel injection: raises the question of fuel efficiency. Gasoline is injected directly into the cylinders for greater efficiency and power. Suggests that efficiency is measured in mechanical terms rather than by social, environmental, and other "contextual" issues.
3. [visual "term"] Web site enables users to check off items for comparison. By choosing from among a narrow range of options, the user accepts the choices as the full range of features. This confines the user to the criteria selected by the manufacturer/vendor. If there were an "other" box, the user would recognize that there are many more issues that need to be recognized. The site does not want that to happen.
4. Change vehicle button uses an imperative verb with an implied subject ("you"). Again, it gives the user a feeling of control and choice. This seems to be a major goal of the web site.

Expectations

An anomaly is something different from the normal pattern: a black polar bear, a talking dog; a blood pressure reading of 190/160. Anomalies are opportunities to make your own claim because they often identify unexplained territories that are worth writing about. List four anomalies from the source. These can be facts, claims, or relations, or information that is being ignored. How was each different from what you expected?

Anomalous Evidence or Claims	What You Expected to Read
<p>Comparisons do not always favor the writer; some differences show the advantage of another company's product. The site seems surprisingly "neutral."</p>	<p>I expected a strong "hard sell" that always emphasized that the Chevrolet product was the preferable one.</p>
<p>The comparisons can involve many cars. Users might use the site to compare cars that are made by two "non-Chevrolet" companies. I see the site as a form of advertising, but this doesn't seem to be as focused on "persuasion" as most advertisements.</p>	<p>I expected only the Chevrolet products.</p>
<p>This is like the anomaly above, but there seem to be "rules" that make an advertisement an advertisement. This seems to be an addition to the definition of "advertising." It isn't a purely emotional appeal.</p>	<p>Advertising seems a form of persuasive writing. Persuasion would seem to rely on emotional appeals.</p>
<p>The control of the results seem to be in the user's hands (or mouse).</p>	<p>I expected that my job would be passive. I'd just absorb what they put out for me to read or look at.</p>

Questions

After you have carefully reviewed the source, ask useful questions whose answer might become your claim. These questions should address the source's assumptions, evidence, thesis, or issues that it ignores.

1. What would be a useful heading for the type of information presented in the comparisons? Naming it might reveal what it is not. Would this would open up the information to additions and analysis? I'm beginning to wonder if a simple list of criteria should always have a name for the category they belong to.
2. If there were alternative "headings" or categories, would this require the inclusion of vehicles other than the ones selected for comparison? "New" seems to be the first "filter" that the comparison uses to select cars, but this is not exactly neutral because other cars might be as desirable if they were compared with, say, "fewer than 20,000 miles." Do such "filters" operate in all comparisons? What is the difference between a criterion and this kind of choosing ahead of time?
3. I'm worried that I'll just put my own "filter" up ahead of time, and the comparison that I create will be just as biased as the ones I've been reading. Am I doomed??????

The student knows that good writers ask questions. She creates a Purpose & Problem Statement to sharpen her focus.

Purpose

Why am I writing this? First, I'm doing the paper because I'm taking a course that teaches modes like comparison. Second, I need a car for school and work, and I'll use the assignment to choose one of the cars I'm considering. I can spend about \$150 per month. My parents will help with the rest of the payment. A critical comparison would help me make a choice that reflects my own needs and my personal values.

Problems

There seems to be lots of mechanical information available, and I would create a heading for "mechanical features" if I were making a chart. But I also note that additional headings are needed for "environmental impact," "mileage," and "family friendliness." My dad used to work building cars, but he lost that job because production moved to Mexico, so, I'm also interested in where the car is built. My biggest task is to revise the list of criteria. Once I've done that, I have to decide on the relative importance of each one. That should let me make an overall assessment of what best reflects my preferences, and it won't be stuck on just the technical aspects of the cars. I also won't be stuck inside the comparative system provided by the people who sell cars.

She has identified gaps in the map by looking at the existing map of differences between the two cars, and she has begun to re-draw the map by adding her own criteria. The criteria have values and beliefs that connect cars to a network of values, beliefs, and real world issues. Her list is more thorough than a simple list of engineering specifications. Compare her work to the simple list in the first examples that compares refrigerators.

Based on what she has discovered, the paper is closer to a beginning. She reviews her discoveries, and then she decides to summarize what she *expects* to say. This is her Prospectus.

Prospectus

Cars have become a natural part of America's landscape. They're so natural that we choose between types of cars with a narrow focus on their mechanical features. Engine size, horsepower, and the other usual aspects of these machines seem all that's needed to measure their differences. However, the criteria for comparing cars can be more complex. The criteria can include environmental impact, mileage, and family friendliness. If we make a comparison on the basis of a larger picture of the world, we will start to think differently about what cars mean. For example, if we see unemployed workers in our community, we might add a criterion that identifies the place of production as an important difference. Although it's tempting to say that comparisons need lots of good criteria, a comparison of cars does something more than just help choose a car. It uses the automobile as a tool for seeing how the objects of daily life tell us about the worlds within which we live. The relation between environment, personal preference, employment, and carbon fuels becomes visible when I develop more complete headings. They name topics that need to be discussed, and those are the real topic of my paper.

What Does This Example Tell Us About Comparison?

At this point, she has a paragraph that can serve as the introduction to the first draft of her paper. She can now start writing a paper that explains her values and beliefs as she reviews the criteria for comparing cars. By revealing these to the reader, her recommendation will be honest and thus much more persuasive. Readers can see the promises she is making about the topics she will cover, and they can clearly see her major idea: cars are a way to understand the culture of America. The comparison in the paper will lead to understanding larger contexts, and it will make a statement.

Example #3: Three Planning Steps that Prepare for a Comparison

For the third example, let's return to the choice between two tests that predict academic success or failure. Another student in the same class as the woman who wrote the comparison of the cars chose to compare the ENGAGE test and the "test" designed by students. He also

used the TEQ Sheet, the Purpose & Problems Statement, and a Prospectus to arrive at his paper.

By the end of each term, lots of students have vanished from my college classes. Some just disappear, but others sort of fade out before they're gone. I'm always curious about why they leave school. It seems like we ought to be able to figure which students are likely to drop out, and then do something to prevent it from happening. This would mean that we have to compare successful students to students who fail.

Different surveys try to make predictions about who will succeed. I've seen the web site from the ACT company for their ENGAGE survey, and I've also seen a list made up by students in a writing class who were trying to figure out the same thing. The two lists of reasons that predict success are really different. On one hand, the ACT people know lots about creating tests, so I'm uncomfortable about saying that a list created by a class of first year students at a community college is worth weighing against the company's work. On the other hand, the students' criteria are so radically different that I have to think about some of the values and beliefs behind each set of criteria.

I'm not really interested in comparing successful and failing students. I really want to compare the two lists to see what's behind their differences. If I contrast the lists, two key ideas seem to be guiding the thinking about what makes students succeed or fail: 1) individual strength, and 2) social forces. While the differences in the lists will tell me about the values and beliefs of each, it will do more. It will make me think about academic failure and success in a better way.

The writer begins by stating the problem and then giving background information about two responses to measuring student success and failure. The focus is on the differences in the criteria.

He announces that he will use a comparison of the two lists to understand how people explain success and failure. He is not choosing one list over the other.

The introduction seems to rely on the second part of a very thorough Purpose & Problems Statement. The emphasis on unresolved problems is especially useful to a comparison paper.

Note that the first three paragraphs are an introduction. They announce the topic, the problem, and the method of the paper. The thesis will likely be a discussion of important issues that will be presented in the conclusions.

The ENGAGE test asks only about individual characteristics that lead to success. Every one of the criteria is about individual psychology and individual traits. The biggest heading is called "Motivation and Skills." These include everything from self-discipline to "goal striving." Even the heading that seems to be about the outside forces that affect students are really individualist. For example, the heading "Social Engagement" is about the individual's personal feelings about social connections and social activity. It's still focused on the individual. The last major heading for the criteria is "Self-Regulation." The term speaks for itself in terms of its focus on the individual.

The ENGAGE criteria are different from the students' criteria because they focus only on the individual. A strict focus on the individual seems very narrow, something that might have come from an idea about behavior that begins by assuming the individual is the only "true" way to understand successful behavior.

The writer uses a block strategy. He begins by thoroughly exploring the ACT list. The key terms are applied first to the list posted on the ACT ENGAGE site.

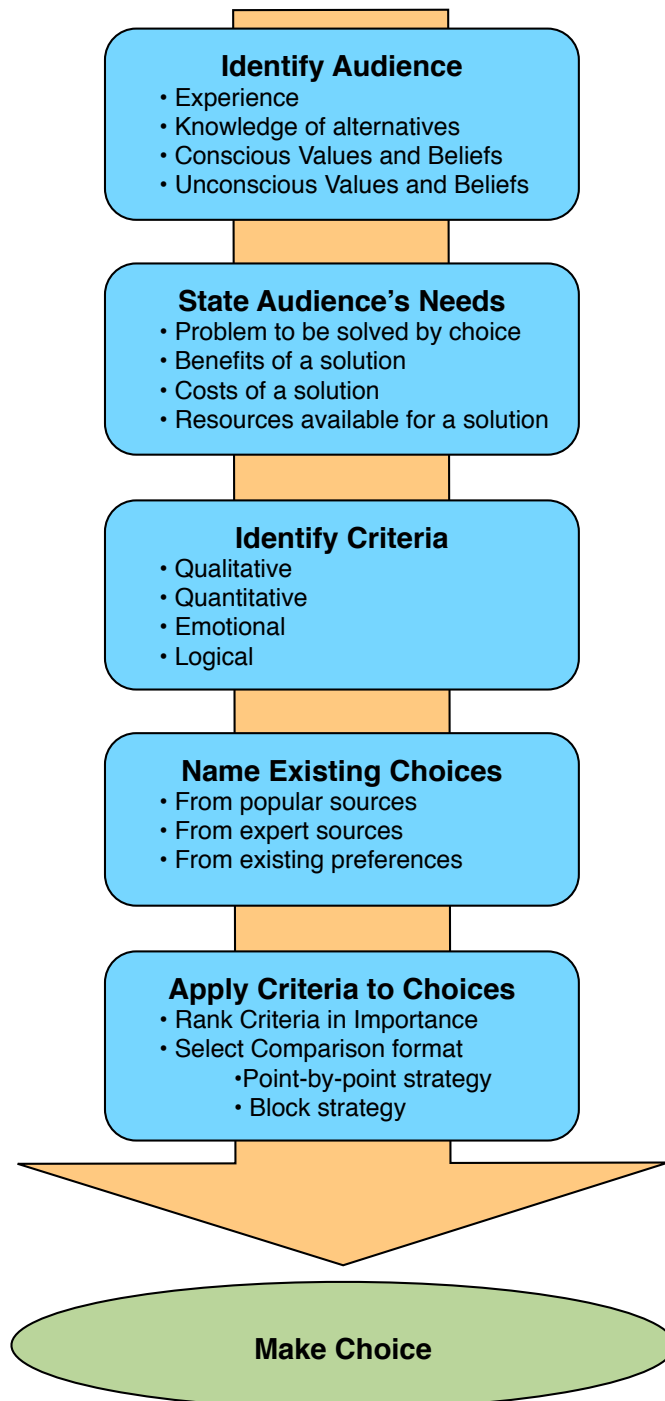
The reader expects a similar section to follow that deals with the students' list.

<p>The students' list is almost the opposite of the one created by ACT. The students don't focus on individual strengths and weaknesses. Instead, they focus on external forces that affect their lives. Their list points to hours worked, childcare responsibilities, the family history of education, and transportation. It seems as if the social world controls what the individual can do. Their strategy emphasizes that students' lives are social lives.</p> <p>Where the ACT strategy is to look inside the student, the students' strategy looks at outside forces. In some ways, this focus has an assumption about there being only one source of failure and success. The students are as interested in success and failure as the ACT researchers, but they seem to have an entirely different set of explanations that account for performance. It seems less moralistic and psychological than the other strategy.</p>	<p>After thoroughly discussing the ACT ENGAGE list, the writer turns his attention to the students' list. The same criteria are applied, and the differences from what was found in the previous section are discussed.</p>
<p>It's hard to predict who will fail and who will succeed in college. It seems reasonable to think in terms of individual strengths and skills. But it also seems reasonable to think about all the roles that students play: student, worker, family member, etc. These roles probably carve up the time and energy a person can devote to being a student. When we think about success and failure, explanations tend to reflect our assumptions about the relative importance of the individual and society. It seems important to recognize how this can be a bias that keeps us from considering important issues. While the ENGAGE test can claim much more power and a lot of research for its tool, that does not mean that the tool deals with social forces. Their work seems to trump the work of the students, but the students' work asks good questions. It may deserve the kind of research that measures how social forces affect a student's probable success.</p>	<p>The conclusion identifies the key ideas that seem to have controlled the similarities and differences between the two strategies. He avoids a true/false, pro/con, either/or kind of thinking, but nonetheless makes a judgment about the two systems of comparison.</p>

What Does This Example Tell Us About Comparison?

The example shows how comparisons can go beyond a simple recommendation. The evidence is based on attention to similarities and differences. The writer finds a valuable difference, and clearly states why the difference matters. This points to a larger, background issue that becomes the focus of the paper.

A FLOW CHART FOR WRITING COMPARISONS



SUMMARY

Comparisons begin by identifying important similarities and differences. Comparisons conclude by recognizing what those similarities and differences tell us. Sometimes, they say something simple: “buy the red shoes, not the green shoes.” Other times, they are more complex because they *discover* an ignored category: “find out if any of the shoes are made using child labor.” The needs of the audience often dictate whether the writer will use a simple comparison or a complex comparison. As both readers and writers, we need to be wary of thinking that the categories of a comparison are natural. The categories for comparison are always selected on the basis of values, beliefs, and needs that should be recognized.