

Writing: Types of Essays

As a student, you'll be asked to write many different types of essays. Comparison-and-contrast essays and book reviews are common assignments in humanities and social science classes, while lab reports are basic requirements for science classes such as biology, chemistry, and physics. Below are some suggestions to help you begin these different essays.

Comparison and Contrast

The comparison-and-contrast essay is one of the most frequently assigned. In this type of essay, your goal is to construct an argument based on a discussion of the similarities and/or differences in two or more texts, theories, or objects. Simply pointing out the similarities and differences is not enough; you also need to state why these similarities/differences matter. For example, in a religion paper you might begin by comparing and contrasting how two religious texts approach the idea of the self, but then move on to formulating a thesis about what role the self plays in achieving enlightenment.

When writing a comparison-and-contrast essay, you should begin with an introductory paragraph that introduces the texts and includes a clear thesis statement about them. In some cases, depending on your audience, a brief summary of the texts would also be appropriate

You can organize the comparison-and-contrast essay either subject-by-subject or point-by-point. In the first pattern of organization, subject-by-subject, you would discuss all your assertions about one subject and then all your assertions about the second subject. Here's an example:

Introduction (Thesis: In the past ten years, flexibility in several key areas has helped private colleges be more successful in achieving their diversity goals than public colleges.)

- A. Private colleges
 - 1. Funding
 - 2. Curriculum
 - 3. Admissions Policy
 - B. Public colleges
 - 1. Funding
 - 2. Curriculum
 - 3. Admissions Policy
- Conclusion

Sometimes organizing a comparison-and-contrast essay by subject tends to break up the analysis and make the essay seem choppy. If so, you can try organizing point-by-point. In this pattern of organization, you would discuss one assertion about both subjects, then another, and another, etc. Here's an example:

Introduction

- A. Funding
 - 1. Private colleges
 - 2. Public colleges>
- B. Curriculum
 - 1. Private colleges
 - 2. Public colleges
- C. Admissions policies
 - 1. Private colleges
 - 2. Public colleges
- Conclusion

Book Reviews

Like other types of essays, a book review needs a well-articulated thesis as well as strong evidence supporting that thesis. It should not be just a summary of the book; rather, it should be a thoughtful, analytical evaluation. Listed below are some points often addressed in a book review:

- The book's thesis and a brief summary.
- A discussion of the author's background and professional credentials.
- An evaluation of the sources that the author uses to support the thesis. What are they? How has the author gathered them? Are they biased?
- An evaluation of the book's central argument. Is it logical? Is it based on valid assumptions? Is it consistent with or different from other work on this subject?
- An evaluation of the book's style. Is it lively and engaging or dull and unappealing? Is the style appropriate for general readers or scholarly readers?
- An evaluation of the book's overall contributions. Does it provide interesting new insights? Does it contribute to the larger discussion of the subject?

Lab Reports

The purpose of a lab report is to provide an accurate record of your experiment and to communicate that you understand the science involved. Although the format of a chemistry lab report can vary somewhat from that of a biology or physics lab report, all generally include the following section, which should be introduced with separate subheadings:

- **Introduction:** a brief discussion that includes a statement of the purpose of the lab as well as some background information that provides a context for your work.
- **Experimental:** a concise description of what you did and what you observed. This section can also be referred to as Methods and Materials
- **Results:** a report of your findings. Sometimes results can be reported in the Discussion section.
- **Discussion:** a detailed discussion of your results and an interpretation of your data and observations. This section can also include your conclusions.
- **References:** a list of relevant sources.

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