

Paragraph Development: (2) Comparison, Contrast, and Analogy

The methods of development we study in this chapter involve two subjects (occasionally more than two). *Analogy* is a special kind of comparison in which a subject of secondary importance and often of a quite different nature is introduced to clarify or justify some aspect of the main subject. *Comparison* treats two subjects of the same nature, as does *contrast*; but the former shows how the subjects are alike, while the latter focuses on how they differ. But despite this difference, comparison and contrast work in the same way, and we consider them together, putting off analogy until the end of the chapter.

Comparison and Contrast Focusing

Because they involve at least two subjects and offer several possibilities of emphasis, comparison and contrast pose problems of focus. For one thing, you must decide whether to deal only with similarities or only with dissimilarities, or to cover both. The topic sentence must make your intention clear to readers:

The difference between a sign and a symbol is, in brief. . . .

Susanne K. Langer

It is a temptation to make a comparison between the nineteen twenties and the nineteen sixties, but the similarities are fewer than the differences.

Russell Lynes

Bears and dogs are alike in one intriguing way.

Evelyn Jones

A second decision of focusing concerns the subjects. Will you concentrate on one subject or treat both equally? If you are comparing (or contrasting), say, New York and Los Angeles, you have three possibilities of focus: New York, Los Angeles, or both. Make clear which it will be. But don't be heavy-handed; a topic sentence like "I shall focus here upon New York" is mechanical and obvious. Instead, construct the topic sentence so that the key idea functions as the subject word and thus naturally indicates your focus. If your chief concern is, say, New York:

In many ways New York is like Los Angeles.

If it is both places:

In many ways New York and Los Angeles are alike.

In the following paragraph notice how the historian J. G. Randall keeps his focus constantly before us. (He is comparing the failure of Reconstruction after the Civil War and the refusal of the U.S. Senate to accept President Wilson's League of Nations policy after World War I. The italics have been added.)

In the case of both *Lincoln and Wilson* the soldiers did their part and so did the Executive, but *in each case* partisanship and narrow-mindedness wrecked the program. *Under Lincoln and Johnson, as under Wilson*, there was failure of high-minded unity behind the plan of peace that bore promise of success. *In each case*, instead

of needful co-operation, there was stupid deadlock between President and Congress. There was *in each case* a fateful congressional election whose effect was felt far down in later years: 1918 may be matched against the "critical year" 1866. *In each case* the President's plan failed in the sense that it failed to be adopted; the opposite plan *in each case* failed miserably by being adopted.

Organizing a Comparison or Contrast

When you compare or contrast any two subjects, which we can call A and B, you do so with regard to specific points, which we'll call 1, 2, 3. Now you may proceed in two ways, organizing around A and B or around 1, 2, 3. Thus in contrasting New York and Los Angeles you might devote the first half of the paragraph (or an entire paragraph) to New York and the second half (or a new paragraph) to Los Angeles. In each section you would cover the same particular points and in the same **order**—say, climate, cultural facilities, and nightlife. Conversely, you might prefer to make climate, cultural facilities, and nightlife the primary centers of your organization, devoting a paragraph or portion of a paragraph to each and discussing how the two cities differ.

Neither way of proceeding is necessarily better. Organizing around A and B stresses each subject in its totality. Organizing around 1, 2, and 3 emphasizes particular likenesses or differences. It all depends on what you want to do. In the following case the writer elected to organize around A and B—**here** Western civilization and Eastern:

Americans and Western Europeans, in their sensitivity to lingering problems around them, tend to make science and progress their scapegoats. There is a belief that progress has precipitated widespread unhappiness, anxieties and other social and emotional problems. Science is viewed as a cold mechanical discipline having nothing to do with human warmth and the human spirit.

But to many of us from the nonscientific East, science does not have such repugnant associations. We are not afraid of it, nor are we disappointed by it. We know all too painfully that our social

and emotional problems festered long before the age of technology. To us, science is warm and reassuring. It promises hope. It is helping us at long last gain some control over our persecutory environments, alleviating age-old **problems**—not only physical but also, and especially, problems of the spirit. F. M. Estabrook

In the next example, on the other hand, a historian contrasting Catholics and Protestants in the sixteenth century organizes not around the broad categories of Roman and Reformer, but rather around the **specific** differences that set them at war:

The Catholic believed in the authority of the Church; the Reformer, in the authority of reason. Where the Church had spoken, the Catholic obeyed. His duty was to accept without question the laws which councils had decreed, which popes and bishops administered, and so far as in him lay to enforce in others the same submission to an outward rule which he regarded as divine. All shades of Protestants on the other hand agreed that authority might err; that Christ had left no visible representative, whom individually they were bound to obey; that religion was the operation of the Spirit on the mind and conscience; that the Bible was God's word, which each Christian was to read, and which with God's help and his natural intelligence he could not fail to understand. The Catholic left his Bible to the learned. The Protestant translated the Bible, and brought it to the door of every Christian family. The Catholic prayed in Latin, and whether he understood his words or repeated them as a form the effect was the same; for it was magical. The Protestant prayed with his mind as an act of faith in a language intelligible to him, or he could not pray at all. The Catholic bowed in awe before his wonder-working image, adored his relics, and gave his life into the guidance of his spiritual director. The Protestant tore open the machinery of the miracles, flung the bones and ragged garments into the fire, and treated priests as men like himself. The Catholic was intolerant upon principle; persecution was the corollary of his creed. The intolerance of the Protestant was in spite of his creed. In denying the right of the Church to define his own belief, he had forfeited the privilege of punishing the errors of those who chose to differ from him. James Anthony Froude

Building the Comparison or Contrast

Closely related to the question of organization is a final problem: in what compositional units will the comparison be **built—that** is, out of paragraphs, portions of paragraphs, sentences, halves of sentences? Probably the simplest plan is to spend a paragraph, or several sentences within a paragraph, on one of the two subjects and a unit of roughly equal length on the other. This is what F. M. Esfandiary does in discussing the differences between Eastern and Western attitudes toward science.

But you may also construct a comparison or contrast in pairs of sentences:

The original Protestants had brought new passion into the ideal of the state as a religious society and they had set about to discipline this society more strictly than ever upon the pattern of the Bible. The later Protestants reversed a fundamental purpose and became the allies of individualism and the secular state.

Herbert Butterfield

Or both parts of the comparison may be held within a single sentence, the total effect being built up from a series of such sentences:

At first glance the traditions of journalism and scholarship seem completely unlike: journalism so bustling, feverish, content with daily oblivion; the academic world so sheltered, deliberate, and hopeful of enduring products. It is true that both are concerned with ascertainment and diffusion of truth. In journalism, however, the emphasis falls on a rapid diffusion of fact and idea; in academic work it falls on a prolonged, laborious **ascertainment**.

Allen Nevins

How you build a comparison or contrast is related, of course, to how you organize it. Using two paragraphs (or two portions of a single paragraph) is better when you are organizing around A and **B—that** is, treating each subject in its

entirety. Proceeding by balanced sentences or halves of sentences is better if you wish to focus on specific points of similarity or difference.

Writing a comparison or contrast requires **finally** that you think carefully about what you want to accomplish and how you can best focus, organize, and work up the material. The problem is further complicated by the fact that none of the choices we have discussed is absolute. A paragraph is not restricted to comparing *or* contrasting: it can do both. It does not have to maintain only one focus: a skillful writer can shift. And extended comparisons and contrasts can, and do, vary their methods of building.

For Practice

> Study the following paragraph and consider these questions: (a) Is the writer comparing, contrasting, or doing both? (b) Which of the two subjects receives the focus? (c) How is the comparison or contrast organized and how is it built?

Let's compare the U.S. to India, for example. We have 203 million people, whereas she has 540 million on much less land. But look at the impact of people on the land.

The average Indian eats his daily few cups of rice (or perhaps wheat, whose production on American farms contributed to our one percent per year drain in quality of our active farmland), draws his bucket of water from the communal well and sleeps in a mud hut. In his daily rounds to gather cow dung to burn to cook his rice and warm his feet, his footsteps, along with those of millions of his countrymen, help bring about a slow deterioration of the ability of the land to support people. His contribution to the destruction of the land is minimal.

An American, on the other hand, can be expected to destroy a piece of land on which he builds a home, garage and driveway. He will contribute his share to the 142 million tons of smoke and fumes, seven million junked cars, 20 million tons of paper, 48 billion cans, and 26 billion bottles the overburdened environment must absorb each year. To run his air conditioner he will **stripmine** a Kentucky hillside, push the dirt and slate down into the stream,

and burn coal in a power generator, whose smokestack contributes to a plume of smoke massive enough to cause cloud seeding and premature precipitation from Gulf winds which should be irrigating the wheat farms of Minnesota.

Wayne H. Davis

▷ Work up a contrast in one or two paragraphs on one of the following subjects. Confine yourself to three or four points of difference and organize around the two **subjects**—that is, discuss all the points with regard to A before going on to B:

1. Any two cities you know well
2. People of two different nationalities
3. A sports car and the family sedan
4. Young people and the middle-aged
5. Two sports

▷ Now compose another paragraph (or paragraphs) on the same subject but this time organize around the three or four points of difference.

▷ Finally, still working with the same topics, write a third paragraph beginning like this:

Yet despite these differences A and B are alike in several ways.

Analogy

Analogy is a special kind of comparison in which a second subject is introduced to explain or justify something about the main topic. Here the American writer Flannery O'Connor addresses a class in creative writing:

I understand that this is a course called "How the Writer Writes," and that each week you are exposed to a different writer who holds forth on the subject. The only parallel I can think of to this is having the zoo come to you, one animal at a time; and I suspect that what you hear one week from the giraffe is contradicted next week by the baboon.

O'Connor's main subject is the course on writing. Her analogy is visiting the zoo, or rather having the zoo visit you. By means of the analogy she presents herself with comic self-deprecation and, more seriously, suggests something about the limitations of teaching creative writing.

Analogies differ from straightforward comparisons in several ways. First, they are always focused on one topic, the analogical subject being secondary, serving to clarify or emphasize or persuade. Second, the analogical subject usually is of a different nature from the main subject, so different that most of us would not think the two at all similar. Comparison typically involves things of similar sort—a Ford and Chevrolet, for example, or New Orleans and San Francisco, high school and college. Analogies, on the other hand, often find unexpected similarities in unlike things, such as a course in writing and a visit from the zoo.

Analogy as Clarification

In exposition the most common function of an analogy is to translate an abstract or difficult idea into more concrete or familiar terms. That is certainly one of the aims of O'Connor's analogy, as it is of this longer example, in which an astronomer explains the philosophy of science:

Let us suppose that an ichthyologist is exploring the life of the ocean. He casts a net into the water and brings up a fishy assortment. Surveying his catch, he proceeds in the usual manner of a scientist to systematize what it reveals. He arrives at two generalizations:

1. No sea-creature is less than two inches long.
2. All sea-creatures have gills.

These are both true of his catch, and he assumes tentatively that they will remain true however often he repeats it.

In applying this analogy, the catch stands for the body of knowledge which constitutes physical science, and the net for the sensory and intellectual equipment which we use in obtaining it. The

casting of the net corresponds to observation; for knowledge which has not been or could not be obtained by observation is not admitted into physical science.

An onlooker may object that the first generalization is wrong. "There are plenty of sea-creatures under two inches long, only your net is not adapted to catch them." The ichthyologist dismisses this objection contemptuously. "Anything uncatchable by my net is *ipso facto* outside the scope of ichthyological knowledge, and is not part of the kingdom of fishes which has been defined as the theme of ichthyological knowledge. In short, what my net can't catch isn't fish." Or—to translate the analogy—"If you are not simply guessing, you are claiming a knowledge of the physical universe discovered in some other way than by the methods of physical science, and admittedly unverifiable by such methods. You are a metaphysician. Bah!"

Sir Arthur Eddington

Analogy as Persuasion

As well as clarifying the unfamiliar, analogies often have considerable persuasive force. Before we look at an example, though, we need to distinguish between *logical* and *rhetorical* analogies. In logic, analogies are a special form of proof; we are *not* concerned with them here.

Our interest is exclusively in rhetorical analogies, and rhetorical analogies *never* constitute logical proof. At best they are what has been called "a weak form of reasoning." They merely suggest that because A resembles B in certain respects, it also resembles it in others. But since the resemblance between A and B is never total and exact, what is true of one cannot necessarily be applied to the other.

For example, some political thinkers have used the "similarity" of a state to a ship to justify an authoritarian society. They argue that a ship can survive storms only when authority is completely in the hands of the captain, who rightfully demands unquestioning obedience. So, they conclude, a state can survive only if its citizens submit unhesitatingly to an absolute ruler. But, of course, ships and states are *not* identical. What may be needed for safety at sea cannot be assumed

to apply to good government on land. Such analogies which claim to "prove" unwarranted conclusions are called "false" or "unfair."

But even though they are not a form of logical proof, rhetorical analogies can be very persuasive. Consider this one used by Abraham Lincoln in a speech opposing the spread of slavery to territories outside the South:

If I saw a venomous snake crawling in the road, any man would say I might seize the nearest stick and kill it; but if I found that snake in bed with my children, that would be another question. I might hurt the children more than the snake, and it might bite them. Much more, if I found it in bed with my neighbor's children, and I had bound myself by a solemn compact not to meddle with his children under any circumstances, it would become me to let that particular mode of getting rid of the gentleman alone. But if there was a bed newly made up, to which the children were to be taken, and it was proposed to take a batch of young snakes and put them there with them, I take it no man would say there was any question how I ought to decide. That is just the case. The new territories are the newly made bed to which our children are to go, and it lies with the nation to say whether they shall have snakes mixed up with them or not. It does not seem as if there could be much hesitation what our policy should be.

Lincoln's argument simply assumes that slavery—the "snake"—is wrong and does not prove it. But most of his audience would not have needed proof. The essential point is that slavery should not be allowed to spread beyond the South, and the analogy is a striking, forceful explanation of why not.

For Practice

▷ Identify the analogies in the following paragraph. What purpose does each serve? Do you think they are effective?

I am an explorer, then, and I am also a stalker, or the instrument of the hunt itself. Certain Indians used to carve long grooves along

the wooden shafts of their arrows. They called the grooves "lightning marks," because they resembled the curved fissures lightning slices down the trunks of trees. The function of lightning marks is this: if the arrow fails to kill the game, blood from a deep wound will channel along the lightning mark, streak down the arrow shaft, and spatter to the ground, laying a trail dripped on broadleaves, on stones, that the barefoot and trembling archer can follow into whatever deep or rare wilderness it leads. I am the arrow shaft, carved along my length by unexpected lights and gashes from the very sky, and this book is the straying trail of blood. Annie Dillard

▷ Analogies are personal things that must grow out of one's experience and values. Here, however, are a few possibilities:

Reading a difficult book and climbing a mountain

A library and a cemetery

A person's (or a nation's) conception of reality and the wearing of glasses

Try to develop an analogy in a single paragraph. The usual procedure is to begin with the main topic (placed first in these examples), or you may prefer to start off with the analogy, moving from there into your main topic.