

## **Module 5: The Comparison and Contrast Essay**

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### **Course**

English 101 – Composition I

### **English 101 – Composition I, 3 semester hours**

The goal of English 101 Composition I is the development of critical and analytical skills in reading and writing expository prose. The general objective is for students to learn strategic steps and the rhetorical devices and modes used in collegiate writing. The specific objective is for students to write a minimum of eight essays according to the basic rhetorical forms: narration, description, definition, example, process analysis, comparison/contrast, classification/division, cause/effect, and argumentation. For each writing assignment, students are expected to (1) select a manageable topic, (2) have a thesis statement that implies or states the essay's plan of development, and (3) construct at least three paragraphs that develop the thesis with concrete, relevant, and cohesive support, using transitional words, phrases, and sentences. They are also expected (4) to use good diction and correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation in 80% of the sentences. *Prerequisite:* Placement test or grade of C or better in English 100 or consent of department chairperson.

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## **Description**

This module is designed to facilitate student fulfillment of specific objectives 2 and 3 of our 101 course syllabus. Unity, support, and coherence are the requisites for the effective collegiate essay in all rhetorical modes. The student examination of sample essays is an excellent way to master these concepts. Consequently, our modules propose to examine appropriate sample essays that demonstrate these requisites in each of the eight rhetorical forms. Our modules will enhance student understanding of the function of thesis, logical organization, topic sentences, supporting paragraph details, and transitional words in each of the sample essays. This exercise will reinforce the concepts of unity, support, and coherence required to effectively set forth and develop a point. Each sample professional essay taken from Langan (2001) is presented in four on-screen computerized exercises.

## **Transferability**

The enhancement of critical and analytical skills in writing and reading expository prose is essential in all other English composition, developmental reading, and literature courses. It is, in fact, essential in all of the liberal arts that students have the skills to identify the main idea, major supporting points, and the effectiveness of those points when reading. It is equally important that students, when writing papers and exams, are capable of formulating an essay that has a clear thesis and coherent and adequately supported points. An on-screen computerized analysis of a sample professional essay in their discipline would be a reinforcement or refresher to what they have been taught in English 101.

## **Faculty Technology Skills**

- The ability to manage the Windows or Macintosh computer operating systems
- The ability to use a wordprocessor (*Microsoft Word, WordPerfect*)
- The ability to open, print, and close a file.
- The ability to use a projector and computer for presentations

## **Student Technology Skills**

- Need to know how to use a word processor
- Need to be able to open, print, save, and close a file
- Need to have the skill to use a mouse to do basic formatting—to make bold, to underline, to make italics

## **Faculty Equipment**

- Individual computer with wordprocessor (*Microsoft Word, WordPerfect*)
- LCD Projector (PC and/or Macintosh compatible)
- Color Printer

## **Student Equipment**

- Individual PC with wordprocessor (*Microsoft Word, WordPerfect*)
- Printer, b/w or color (optional)

## **Improvement on Technology and Learning**

The concept of a well-developed essay, centered around one controlling idea, and connected by logical transitions between sentences and paragraphs, is a difficult one for many community college students to master. This technological approach to sample essay analysis gives the student the opportunity to observe the essay on the screen and have the benefit of a classroom

team approach to analysis. It encourages greater student involvement, and as an educational approach, it is far more engaging.

### **Nontechnology Comparison**

Traditionally, study of the eight rhetorical modes has included student analysis of the appropriate sample essays as part of a homework assignment and then class textbook analysis of the essay to strengthen student understanding of the rhetorical modes. Students still need to study their sample essay and the theory of the rhetorical mode that it embodies before the class meeting. This teaching approach is much more engaging and interesting than the individual textbook approach because the student is no longer working as an individual in his or her own textbook, but as a part of a collaborative interactive classroom team in the essay analysis.

### **Pertinent Issues**

Teachers need to be aware of . . .

- Possible limitations on copyrighted commercial work.
- The range of text-available Internet sites, free and free sources (when model essays are used from sources other than the class textbook).
- Built-in limitations of older word processing programs and printers.
- Obstacles to learning presented by student lack of required computer skills.
- The fact that the module exercises can be adapted to the *Blackboard* course management system.

### **How to Use This Module in the Classroom**

It is imperative that a preliminary general discussion of rhetoric—the elements of the essay—precede any specific consideration of rhetorical mode. Therefore, prior to teaching each lesson on a specific rhetorical mode and the specific module given here to enhance that mode, the instructor must begin the 101 course and each unit of rhetorical mode—illustration, narration/description, process analysis, definition, division and classification, comparison and contrast, cause and effect, argumentation—with a review of the general elements of the essay.

The initial units of the English 101 composition course should thoroughly cover general rhetorical theory. The chapters and exercises therein may be assigned for homework. The instructor may lecture on this rhetorical theory and as a classroom activity allow the students to orally review the chapter exercises. At the completion of this unit, the student should understand the following general rhetorical theory:

- **Elements and Language of the Essay**

An *essay* is a relatively short piece of nonfiction in which a writer attempts to develop one or more closely related points or ideas.

The *thesis* of an essay is its main idea. Sometimes, it is implied rather than directly stated. The thesis determines the content of the essay: everything the writer says must be logically related to the thesis statement. A good thesis statement identifies the topic and makes an assertion about it. A well-written essay should be *unified*; that is, everything in it should be related to its thesis, or main idea. There should be no digressions. A unified essay stays within the limits of its thesis. Your essay is unified if you advance a single point and stick to that point. If all the details in your essay relate to your thesis and supporting topic sentences, your essay is unified.

An effective essay requires a good *introduction* or beginning and a good *conclusion* or ending. A good beginning should catch a reader's interest and then hold it. In addition to capturing your reader's attention, a good beginning frequently introduces your thesis and either suggests or reveals the structure of the essay. The best beginning is the one most appropriate for the job you are trying to do.

A conclusion may summarize; may inspire the reader to further thought or action; may return to the beginning by repeating key words, phrases, or ideas; or may surprise the reader by providing a particularly convincing example to support a thesis.

The *paragraph*, like the essay, has its own main or controlling idea, often stated directly in a *topic sentence*. It should be unified, with every sentence relating to the main idea. Like the essay as a whole, the paragraph should be coherent with sentences and ideas arranged logically using appropriate transitional words. Moreover, like the essay, the paragraph requires adequate development—enough examples to convince the reader of the topic sentence.

*Transitions* are words and phrases used to signal relationships between ideas in an essay and to join the various parts of an essay together. Writers use transitions to relate ideas within sentences, between sentences, and between paragraphs. The most common type of transition is the *transitional expression*, such as *furthermore*, *consequently*, *similarly*, *granted*, *nevertheless*, *for instance*, *elsewhere*, *simply stated*, *finally*, *to conclude*, and *subsequently*. Pronoun reference and *repeated key words and phrases* are the other important ways to make transitions. Good transitions enhance *coherence*: the quality of good writing when all sentences, paragraphs, and longer divisions of an essay are effectively and naturally connected.

- **The Comparison and Contrast Essay**

Assign the chapter to your students for homework. They should read the theory and complete the exercises in their textbook. Upon completion of your lecture, the classroom discussion of theory, and the review of textbook exercises, your students should have gained the following understanding: A comparison points out how two or more persons, places, or things are alike. A contrast points out how they differ. The function of the comparison and contrast essay is to clarify and explain. The purpose of the essay may be to inform, to explain something unfamiliar, to make the reader aware of similar ideas or differences, or to point out the superiority of one thing over another. The comparison and contrast essay may be organized by *the subject-by-subject pattern* or the *point-by-point pattern*. The subject-by-subject pattern (or one-side-at-a-time pattern) is useful in short essays. The point-by-point pattern is preferable in long essays.

Now you may announce to your students “To further enhance our understanding of this rhetorical mode, let us leave our textbook this class session and examine a model student essay that is not taken from our textbook” (Langan, 2001, p. 177).

## Exercise 1

First, let us look at scrambled sentences from a paragraph of this essay and unscramble them to test our understanding of logical organization.

My study habits in high school obviously, were a mess. I had made my usual desperate effort to cram the night before, with the usual dismal results—I had gotten only to page 75 of a 400-page textbook. One June day, I staggered into a high school classroom to take my final exam in United States History IV. But in college, I've made an attempt to reform my note-taking, studying, and test-taking skills.

### Exercise 2

Now, let us look at these scrambled paragraphs, which appear out of their correct order in the essay and match them to their appropriate topic sentences. In addition, in **orange**, let us underline any sentences that do not advance the topic and thereby violate paragraph unity. This exercise enhances our understanding of paragraph unity and support.

Paragraphs	Topic Sentences
<p>My all-night study sessions in high school were experiments in self-torture. Around 2:00 A.M., my mind, like a soaked sponge, simply stopped absorbing things. Now, I space out exam study sessions over several days. That way, the night before can be devoted to an overall review rather than raw memorizing. Most important, though, I've changed my attitude toward tests. In high school, I thought tests were mysterious things with completely unpredictable questions. Now, I ask instructors about the kinds of questions that will be on the exam, and I try to "psych out" the areas or facts instructors are likely to ask about. These practices really work, and for me they've taken much of the fear and mystery out of tests.</p>	<p>Ordinary studying during the term is another area where I've made changes.</p>
<p>In high school, I let reading assignments go. I told myself that I'd have no trouble catching up on 200 pages during a 15-minute ride to school. College courses have taught me to keep pace with the work. Otherwise, I feel as though I'm sinking into a quicksand of unread material. When I finally read the high school assignment, my eyes would run over the words, but my brain would be plotting how to get the car for Saturday night. Now, I use several techniques that force me to really concentrate on my reading.</p>	<p>In addition to learning how to cope with daily work, I've also learned to handle study sessions for big tests.</p>

### Exercise 3

For another exercise in logical organization, let us look at the scrambled five paragraphs of this essay and put them into logical order.

Scrambled Paragraphs	Logical Order
<p>As I took notes in high school classes, I often lost interest and began doodling, drawing Martians or seeing what my signature would look like if I married the cute guy in the second row. Now, however, I try not to let my mind wander, and I pull my thoughts back into focus when they begin to go fuzzy. In high school, my notes often looked like something written in Arabic. In college, I've learned to use a semiprint writing style that makes my notes understandable. When I would look over my high school notes, I couldn't understand them. There would be a word like "Reconstruction," then a big blank, then the word "important." Weeks later, I had no idea what Reconstruction was or why it was important. I've since learned to write down connecting ideas, even if I have to take the time to do it after class. Taking notes is one thing I've really learned to do better since high school days.</p>	
<p>One June day, I staggered into a high school classroom to take my final exam in United States History IV. I had made my usual desperate effort to cram the night before, with the usual dismal results—I had gotten only to page 75 of a 400-page textbook. My study habits in high school, obviously, were a mess, but in college, I've made an to reform my note-taking, studying, and test-taking skills.</p>	
<p>In addition to learning how to cope with daily work, I've also learned to handle study sessions for big tests. My all-night study sessions in high school were experiments in self-torture. Around 2:00 A.M., my mind, like a soaked sponge, simply stopped absorbing things. Now, I space out exam study sessions over several days. That way,</p>	

<p>the night before can be devoted to an overall review rather than raw memorizing. Most important, though, I've changed my attitude toward tests. In high school, I thought tests were mysterious things with completely unpredictable questions. Now, I ask instructors about the kinds of questions that will be on the exam, and I try to "psych out" the areas or facts instructors are likely to ask about. These practices really work, and for me they've taken much of the fear and mystery out of tests.</p>	
<p>Ordinary studying during the term is another area in which I've made changes. In high school, I let reading assignments go. I told myself that I'd have no trouble catching up on 200 pages during a 15-minute ride to school. College courses have taught me to keep pace with the work. Otherwise, I feel as though I'm sinking into a quicksand of unread material. When I finally read the high school assignment, my eyes would run over the words, but my brain would be plotting how to get the car for Saturday night. Now, I use several techniques that force me to really concentrate on my reading.</p>	
<p>Since I've reformed, note-taking and studying are not as tough as they once were, and I am beginning to reap the benefits. As time goes on, my college test sheets are going to look much different from the red-marked tests of my high school days.</p>	

#### Exercise 4

Now, let us look at this sample for the last time and better perceive the logic and coherence of essay organization by drawing a **red** line under the thesis or main idea; a **blue** line under the topic sentences in the body, which support that thesis or main idea; and a **green** line under the transition words that enhance coherence between these paragraphs.

#### Studying: Then and Now

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As I took notes in high school classes, I often lost interest and began doodling, drawing Martians, or seeing what my signature would look like if I married the cute guy in the second row. Now, however, I try not to let my mind wander, and I pull my thoughts back into focus when they begin to go fuzzy. In high school, my notes often looked like something written in Arabic. In college, I've learned to use a semiprint writing style that makes my notes understandable. When I would look over my high school notes, I couldn't understand them. There would be a word like "Reconstruction," then a big blank, then the word "important." Weeks later, I had no idea what reconstruction was or why it was important. I've since learned to write down connecting ideas, even if I have to take the time to do it after class. Taking notes is one thing I've really learned to do better since high school days.

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In addition to learning how to cope with daily work, I've also learned to handle study sessions for big tests. My all-night study sessions in high school were experiments in self-torture. Around 2:00 A.M., my mind, like a soaked sponge, simply stopped absorbing things. Now, I space out exam study sessions over several days. That way, the night before can be devoted to an overall review rather than raw memorizing. Most important, though, I've changed my attitude toward tests. In high school, I thought tests were mysterious things with completely unpredictable questions. Now, I ask instructors about the kinds of questions that will be on the exam, and I try to "psych out" the areas or facts instructors are likely to ask about. These practices really work, and for me they've taken much of the fear and mystery out of tests.

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### **Recommendation for Assessment**

It is highly recommended that instructors using this module assess learning by selecting a model essay from a source other than the student textbook.

### **Reference**

Langan, J. (2001). *College writing skills with readings*. New York: McGraw-Hill.