

Expanding Your Writing Skills

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Week One

Lesson One

Welcome to this nine-week fourth-grade writing class. We are going to have so much fun!

Did you know that you have been writing your whole life? It's true. Even if you have never put a pen to paper or typed out a single word on a keyboard, you have been writing.

How?

To understand the answer to that question, you need to understand that writing is a process and that the first stage of that process is called *pre-writing*. Do you know what “pre-” means? It means “before.” So everything you have ever thought or said or done or experienced *before* you perform the act of writing (which is the second stage of the writing process) is part of the first stage of the process. Even if you have never written anything before, you have been in the first stage of the writing process your entire life. Maybe you *have* written before. Now you need to move to the next stage.

Maybe you have made up stories or written about other people's stories or written to a friend about something that happened to you. In this class, you can learn how to be a *better* writer, and maybe you will produce a *different* kind of writing than you've ever written before.

In the next nine weeks, you will learn about the following kinds of writing:

- Comparison/contrast essays
- Book reviews
- Bibliographies
- Features (In this fun assignment, you will also learn how to conduct an interview.)
- Persuasive essays

And we will sharpen your skills for writing strong paragraphs and how to know when you have an appropriate amount of dialogue and description in your writing.

Are you ready to get started? Your first assignment is to make what I call an “Expert List.” Did you know you are an expert about a lot of things? It’s true! I want you to set a timer for five minutes. Within that time, write down as many different things as you can think of that you know a lot about (try to come up with at least twenty). Is it a certain video game? A TV show? Your best friend? Your siblings? Maybe you can play an instrument or a sport. Maybe you know a lot about your favorite book or hobby. The possibilities are endless. If you get to twenty and still have time left over, go ahead and write down more things until you run out of time. If you run out of time before you have twenty items, just reset the timer and keep going until you have at least twenty.

For most of this class, I will not ask you to do something without also doing it myself. So, on the next page are the items I was able to come up with in five minutes. You will see that I was able to list twenty-one items.

My Expert List

1. Writing
2. My daughter
3. My husband
4. Growing up in Oklahoma
5. Living in Nevada in the '90s
6. Living in Arkansas
7. Traveling
8. My favorite movies
9. Teaching
- 10.English
- 11.History
- 12.Going to public school in the '70s and '80s
- 13.My favorite singers
- 14.My family of origin (mom, dad, brother, and me)
- 15.Planning a wedding
- 16.Planning parties
- 17.Cooking certain dishes
- 18.My favorite books
- 19.Getting older
- 20.Swimming
- 21.Playing a clarinet

Lesson Two

Were you able to list at least twenty items on your Expert List yesterday? Good job! Today, you will return to your list, so make sure you have it with you. Before we return to that, though, we need to talk about *comparing* and *contrasting*. Do you know what those words mean? When we compare, we tell how things are *alike*; when we contrast, we tell how things are *different*.

For our purposes, we will compare and contrast two items.

On your Expert List, see if you can find things that can be compared and contrasted. I will use my list as an example. My notes for today's assignment are in red.

My Expert List

1. Writing – I could compare two different types of writing, such as writing a poem and writing a short story.
2. My daughter – She is an only child, so I can't compare and contrast her with a sibling, but I could tell about the ways she and I are alike and different.
3. My husband – This one is easy: I can tell how he and I are alike and different.
4. Growing up in Oklahoma – Since I have lived in three different states (see # 5 and #6), I could choose two of the states to compare and contrast.
5. Living in Nevada in the '90s – See my note for #4.
6. Living in Arkansas – See my note for #4.
7. Traveling – I have traveled to thirty-eight different states and six countries besides the United States. I could choose any two places to compare and contrast.
8. My favorite movies – I could compare and contrast two different movies or an aspect of two different movies or even two of something within the same movie, such as two different characters. I could compare and contrast a movie with the book it's based on (see #18).

9. Teaching – I have taught both high school and college. I have taught both in a classroom and online. I have taught a whole group of people and just one person. I could compare and contrast any of those.
10. English – I could compare and contrast, say, a declarative and an interrogative sentence or an adjective and an adverb.
11. History – I could do so much with this: compare and contrast two historical figures, two events, etc.
12. Going to public school in the ‘70s and ‘80s – I could compare and contrast public schools then vs. now or my public school experiences with my daughter’s homeschooling experiences.
13. My favorite singers – Pick a couple of them to compare and contrast or maybe even pick two songs by the same singer to compare and contrast.
14. My family of origin (mom, dad, brother, and me) – I could compare and contrast my daughter’s family of origin with her, her mom, and her dad); how my mom and dad are alike and different; how my brother and I are alike and different.
15. Planning a wedding – How it is like and unlike planning a party (see #16) or how two types of weddings are alike and different.
16. Planning parties – How it is like and unlike planning a wedding (see #15) or how two types of parties are alike and different.
17. Cooking certain dishes – Find Similarities and differences between, say, rigatoni and spaghetti pie.
18. My favorite books – I could compare and contrast two different books or an aspect of two different books or even two of something within the same book, such as two different characters. I could compare and contrast a book with its movie version (see #8).
19. Getting older – This one is kind of hard . . . maybe what it is really like vs. what I thought it would be like?
20. Swimming – I could compare and contrast two different strokes.
21. Playing a clarinet – It is the only instrument I have ever truly played, so I don’t have another instrument to compare and contrast with it. Maybe I could

compare and contrast playing solo and playing in a group or playing two different pieces of music.

Now it's your turn! See if you can find something to compare and contrast for each of the items on your list. If you get truly stuck on an item, that's okay; just skip it. But try not to skip more than a couple.

Lesson Three

Let's recap. You should have at least twenty items on your Expert List, and for all (or most) of the items, you should have an idea how to compare and contrast two things associated with the items.

Today, you are going to choose a topic for your essay and brainstorm ideas. Ultimately, you will end up with a tentative outline of your essay.

Before that, though, let's talk about how a compare/contrast essay is structured. As with any essay, this one will have three sections: an introduction, a body, and a conclusion.

The Introduction

The introduction has two purposes: to capture readers' attention and to introduce what the essay is about.

Capturing Attention

There are several ways to do this. You can begin with an interesting anecdote (which is a very short story), a quote, or a question, for example. Sometimes, if appropriate for the topic of your essay, you can also begin with startling statistics. After you have captured readers' attention, lead into your thesis, or main idea, statement. For the thesis of a compare/contrast essay, list the areas that serve as your bases of comparison and contrast (more about that a little later in the lesson). For our purposes, let's say your introduction should be one paragraph that is three to five sentences.

The Body

This is the main part of your essay. It will be several paragraphs; the exact number will depend on how many bases of comparison and contrast you have. For our purposes, let's say each body paragraph should be five to seven sentences.

The Conclusion

Just as it sounds, this paragraph of three to five sentences will conclude, or end, your essay. We will talk more in a later lesson about ways to do that.

More About the Body

There are two ways to organize the body of a comparison/contrast essay: *subject-by-subject* and *point-by-point*. The easiest way to explain these is by giving an example. If you go back to my Expert List and the ideas I had yesterday about how to turn items in the list into a compare/contrast essay, you will see that #3 says, "My husband – **This one is easy: I can tell how he and I are alike and different.**" Now I will brainstorm ideas:

<u>My husband</u>	<u>Me</u>
more uptight	more laid back
business-like	personable
math and science minded	language and social studies minded
messy	neat
big spender	thrifty

both (similarities): same values, beliefs, and basic priorities

We are going to call "My husband" SUBJECT A.

We are going to call "Me" SUBJECT B.

In SUBJECT-BY-SUBJECT organization, an outline of the essay would look like this:

- I. Introduction
 - A. Capture attention
 - B. State the thesis

- II. Body Paragraph 1: Similarities between the two subjects
 - A. Values
 - B. Beliefs
 - C. Basic priorities

- III. Body Paragraph 2: Description of SUBJECT A
 - A. Uptight
 - B. Business-like
 - C. Math and science minded
 - D. Messy
 - E. Big spender

- IV. Body paragraph 3: Description of SUBJECT B
 - A. Laid back
 - B. Personable
 - C. Language and social studies minded
 - D. Neat
 - E. Thrifty

- V. Conclusion

In POINT-BY-POINT organization, an outline of the essay would look like this:

- I. Introduction
 - A. Capture attention
 - B. State the thesis

- II. Body Paragraph 1: Similarities between the two subjects
 - A. Values
 - B. Beliefs
 - C. Basic priorities

- III. Body Paragraph 2: Basis of Comparison (or Point) #1—Personality
 - A. SUBJECT A – uptight, business-like, math and science minded
 - B. SUBJECT B – laid back, personable, language and social studies minded

- IV. Body Paragraph 3: Basis of Comparison (Point) #2—Housekeeping
 - A. SUBJECT A – messy
 - B. SUBJECT B – neat

- V. Body Paragraph 4: Basis of Comparison (Point) #3—Money Habits
 - A. SUBJECT A – big spender
 - B. SUBJECT B – thrifty

- VI. Conclusion

Today's assignment: Choose a topic from your assignment yesterday. Then brainstorm ideas about how the two subjects are similar and different. Ultimately, you will end up with a tentative outline of your essay. See my examples for guidance.

Lesson Four

Now that you have a tentative outline, it is time to start putting the essay together. Today's goal is to write an introduction. Remember yesterday when I listed several ways to begin? Try one out and see how it goes.

For example, I am going to begin with an anecdote:

My husband and I have been married for twenty-six years and have never once had a cross word between us. We get along perfectly because we are so well-matched and think the same way about everything. Oh, who am I trying to kid? *My husband and I have very different personalities, housekeeping habits, and money habits.*

In the introduction above, I started with an anecdote and then led into the thesis statement (in italics). Notice that I listed the bases of comparison in the thesis and that the paragraph is within the target length of three to five sentences.

I encourage you to experiment with two or three different ways to begin your essay to see which one you like best.

Lesson Five

Today, try to write a *rough draft* of your body paragraphs. A rough draft is called "rough" because it is not meant to be perfect. For example, you might have misspelled words or punctuation errors. Don't worry about all that right now. Just try to get the information in your outline onto your paper.

Here is mine:

Even though my husband and I have our differences, we are alike in the most important ways: we share the same values, beliefs, and basic priorities. For example, one thing we have in common is that our relationship with Jesus Christ is the most important one to us. After that, we agree that relationships with others are

important—with each other, with our daughter, with other family, and with friends. Even when life gets crazy, we still make time for the people who are important to us because they take priority.

One way we are definitely different, however, is in our personalities. My husband tends to be a more uptight person while I am more laid-back. The “little things” bother him more than they do me. Also, he is more business-like when he interacts with people while I am more personable. Finally, he is more math and science-minded while I am more language and social studies-minded. He does well with numbers and facts; I do well with words and ideas.

Another way my husband and I are different is in the way we keep house. My husband is messier than I am. When he takes off his shoes or coat, for example, they stay in the place that he took them off sometimes for days. I, however, believe there is a place for everything and like for everything to be in its place. One of the last things I do before bed each evening is make sure that everything is picked up and ready to go for the next day--the dishes are clean and put away, the laundry is done, etc. I literally can't go to sleep otherwise, so I guess you could say in this particular area that I am the one who is more uptight.

Finally, my husband and I differ in our spending habits. Of the two of us, he is the bigger spender by far. For example, he is more likely to upgrade while I tend to just make do with what I already have. And if I have to make a purchase, I typically don't choose the most expensive brand while he does. He takes the saying, “You get what you pay for,” to heart while I believe “a penny saved is a penny earned.”