

# 5

---

---

## WRITING A COMPARISON

If you really want to see something, look at something else.

—Howard Nemerov

Everything is what it is and not another thing.

—Bishop Joseph Butler

### COMPARING AS A WAY OF DISCOVERING

Analysis frequently involves comparing: Things are examined for their resemblances to and differences from other things. Strictly speaking, if one emphasizes the differences rather than the similarities, one is contrasting rather than comparing, but we need not preserve this distinction; we can call both processes *comparing*.

Although your instructor may ask you to write a comparison of two works of art, the *subject* of the essay is the *works*, or, more precisely, the subject is the thesis you are advancing; for example, that one work is later than the other or is more successful. Comparison is simply an effective analytical *technique* to show some of the qualities of the works. We usually can get a clearer idea of what *X* is when we compare it to *Y*—provided that *Y* is at least somewhat like *X*. Comparing, in short, is a way of discovering, a way of learning, and ultimately a way of helping your reader to see things your way.

In the words of Howard Nemerov, quoted at the top of this page, “If you really want to see something, look at something else.” But the “something else” can’t be any old thing. It has to be relevant. For example, in a course in architecture you may compare two subway stations (considering the efficiency of the pedestrian patterns, the amenities, and the aesthetic qualities), with the result that you may come to understand both of them more fully; but a comparison of a subway station with a dormitory, no matter how elegantly written, can hardly teach the reader or the writer anything. If you keep in mind the principle that a comparison should help you to learn, you will not (unless you are kidding around) make useless



*Shaka nyorai*, The Historical Buddha. Sakyamuni Buddha. Japanese, late Heian period, late 10th-early 11th century. Cherry with polychrome and gold; single woodblock construction, 83 cm (32  $\frac{1}{8}$  in.) (height of figure). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Denman Waldo Ross Collection, 09.72.

comparisons, such as “What do Winnie the Pooh and Alexander the Great have in common?” “Same middle name.”

Art historians almost always use comparisons when they discuss authenticity: A work of uncertain attribution is compared with undoubtedly genuine works on the assumption that an inauthentic work, when closely compared with genuine works, will somehow be markedly different, perhaps in brush technique, and thereby shown probably not to be genuine (here we get to the thesis) despite superficial similarities of, say, subject matter and medium. (This assumption can be challenged—a given artist may have produced a work with unique characteristics—but it is nevertheless widely held.)

Comparisons are also commonly used in dating a work, and thus in tracing the history of an artistic movement or the development of an artist's career. The assumption here is that certain qualities in a work indicate the period, the school, perhaps the artist, and even the period within the artist's career. Let's assume, for instance, that there is no doubt about who painted a particular picture, and that the problem is the date of the work. By comparing this work with a picture that the artist is known to have done, say, in 1850, and with yet another that the artist is known to have done in 1870, one



*Guanyin*, Chinese, Song Dynasty, 12th century. Wood with traces of polychrome and gilt. Overall: 141 × 88 × 88 cm (55 ½ × 34 ¾ × 34 ¾ in.). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Hervey E. Wetzel, 20.590.

may be able to conjecture that the undated picture was done, say, midway between the dated works, or that it is close in time to one or the other.

The assumptions underlying the uses of comparison are that an expert can recognize not only the stylistic characteristics of an artist, but can also identify those that are permanent and can establish the chronology of those that are temporary. In practice these assumptions are usually based on yet another assumption: A given artist's early works are relatively immature; the artist then matures, and if there are some dated works, we can with some precision trace this development or evolution. Whatever the merits of these assumptions, comparison is a tool by which students of art often seek to establish authenticity and chronology. Again, the comparison is not made for the sake of writing a comparison; rather, it is made for the sake of making a point.

## TWO WAYS OF ORGANIZING A COMPARISON

We can call the two ways of organizing a comparison *block-by-block* (or, less elegantly but perhaps more memorably, *lumping*) and *point-by-point* (or *splitting*). When you compare block-by-block, you say what you have to say about one artwork in a block or lump, and then you go on to discuss the second artwork, in another block or lump. When you compare point-by-point, however, you split up your discussion of each work, more or less interweaving your comments on the two things being compared, perhaps in alternating paragraphs, or even in alternating sentences.

Here is a miniature essay—it consists of only one paragraph—that illustrates lumping. The writer compares a Japanese statue of a Buddha (page 136) with a Chinese statue of a bodhisattva (page 137). (A Buddha has achieved enlightenment and has withdrawn from the world. A bodhisattva—in Sanskrit the term means “enlightened being”—is, like a Buddha, a person of very great spiritual enlightenment, but unlike a Buddha, a bodhisattva chooses to remain in this world in order to save humankind.) The writer’s point here is simply to inform the museum-goer that all early East Asian religious images are not images of the Buddha. The writer says what she has to say about the Buddha, all in one lump, and then in another lump says what she has to say about the bodhisattva.

The Buddha, recognizable by a cranial bump that indicates a sort of supermind, sits erect and austere in the lotus position (legs crossed, each foot with the sole upward on the opposing thigh), in full control of his body. The carved folds of his garments, in keeping with the erect posture, are severe, forming a highly disciplined pattern that is an outward expression of his remote, constrained, austere inner nature. The bodhisattva, on the other hand, sits in a languid, sensuous posture known as “royal ease,” the head pensively tilted downward, one knee elevated, one leg hanging down. He is accessible, relaxed, and compassionate.

The structure is, simply, this:

The Buddha (posture, folds of garments, inner nature)

The bodhisattva (posture, folds of garments, inner nature)

If, however, the writer had wished to split rather than to lump, she would have compared an aspect of the Buddha with an aspect of the bodhisattva, then another aspect of the Buddha with another aspect of the bodhisattva, and so on, perhaps ending with a synthesis to clarify the point of the comparison. The paragraph might have read like this:

The Buddha, recognizable by a cranial bump that indicates a sort of supermind, sits erect and austere, in the lotus position (legs

crossed, each foot with the sole upward on the opposing thigh), in full control of his body. In contrast, the bodhisattva sits in a languid, sensuous posture known as "royal ease," the head pensively tilted downward, one knee elevated, one leg hanging down. The carved folds of the Buddha's garments, in keeping with his erect posture, are severe, forming a highly disciplined pattern, whereas the bodhisattva's garments hang naturalistically. Both figures are spiritual, but the Buddha is remote, constrained, and austere; the bodhisattva is accessible, relaxed, and compassionate.

In effect the structure is this:

The Buddha (posture)

The bodhisattva (posture)

The Buddha (garments)

The bodhisattva (garments)

The Buddha and the bodhisattva (synthesis)

When you offer an extended comparison, it is advisable to begin by indicating your focus, that is, by defining the main issue or problem—for instance, the kind of ivory, the subject matter, the treatment of space, and the style of the carving suggest that this piece is fourteenth-century French and that piece is a modern fake—and also by indicating what your principle of organization will be.

*Caution:* Splitting is well suited to short essays, say from one to three paragraphs, or for occasional use within longer essays, but if it is relentlessly used as the organizing principle of a longer essay, it is likely to produce a ping-pong effect. The essay may not come into focus—the reader may not grasp the point—until the writer stands back from the seven-layer cake and announces, in the concluding paragraph, that the odd layers taste better. In your preparatory thinking, splitting probably will help you to get certain characteristics clear in your mind, but you must come to some conclusions about what these add up to before writing the final version. The final version should not duplicate the preliminary thought processes; rather, since the point of a comparison is to make a point, it should be organized so as to make the point clearly and effectively.

Lumping, especially if the essay is no longer than two or three paragraphs, will often do the trick. After reflection you may decide that although there are superficial similarities between X and Y, there are essential differences; in the finished essay, then, you probably will not wish to obscure the main point by jumping back and forth from one work to the other, working through a series of similarities and differences. It may be better to announce your thesis, then discuss X, and then Y.

Whether in any given piece of writing you should compare by lumping or by splitting will depend largely on your purpose and on the complexity of the material. Lumping is usually preferable for long, complex comparisons, if for no other reason than to avoid the ping-pong effect, but no hard-and-fast rule covers all cases here. Some advice, however, may be useful:

**If you split**, in rereading your draft:

- *Ask yourself if your imagined reader can keep up with the back-and-forth movement.* Make sure (perhaps by a summary sentence at the end) that the larger picture is not obscured by the zigzagging.
- *Don't leave any loose ends.* Make sure that if you call attention to points 1, 2, and 3 in X, you mention all of them (not just 1 and 2) in Y.

**If you lump**, do not simply comment first on X and then on Y.

- *Let your reader know where you are going*, probably by means of an introductory sentence.
- *Don't be afraid in the second half to remind the reader of the first half.* It is legitimate, even desirable, to connect the second half of the comparison (chiefly concerned with Y) to the first half (chiefly concerned with X). Thus, you will probably say things like "Unlike X, Y show. . ." or "Although Y superficially resembles X in such-and-such, when looked at closely Y shows. . . ." In short, a comparison organized by lumping will not break into two separate halves if the second half develops by reminding the reader how it differs from the first half.



### A RULE FOR WRITERS:

When you write a comparison you are not merely making two lists. Rather, you are making a point, arguing a thesis. Indeed, you may want to introduce the comparison with a thesis sentence.

### ✓ Checklist for Writing a Comparison

Have I asked myself the following questions?

- Is the point of the comparison clear? (Examples: to show that although *X* and *Y* superficially resemble each other, they are significantly different; or, to show that *X* is better than *Y*; or, to illuminate *X* by briefly comparing it to *Y*.) Phrases like “Despite these differences” and “A less conspicuous but still significant resemblance” are signs that critical thinking is at work, that a point is being made.
- Are all significant similarities and differences covered?
- Is the organization clear? If the chief organizational device is lumping, does the second half of the essay connect closely enough with the first so that the essay does not divide into two essays? If the chief organizational device is splitting, does the essay avoid the Ping-Pong effect? Given the topic and the thesis, is it the best organization?
- If a value judgment is offered, is it supported by evidence?

# *A Short Guide to Writing about Art*

---

---

TENTH EDITION

**SYLVAN BARNET**  
*Tufts University*

PEARSON

Boston Columbus Indianapolis New York San Francisco Upper Saddle River  
Amsterdam Cape Town Dubai London Madrid Milan Munich Paris Montreal Toronto  
Delhi Mexico City São Paulo Sydney Hong Kong Seoul Singapore Taipei Tokyo



**Editor-in-Chief:** Sarah Touborg  
**Editorial Assistant:** Carla Wörner  
**Editorial Project Manager:** David Nitti  
**Director of Marketing:** Brandy Dawson  
**Senior Marketing Manager:** Kate Mitchell  
**Marketing Assistant:** Kyle VanNatter  
**Assistant Managing Editor:** Melissa Feimer  
**Production Project Manager:** Jean Lapidus  
**Composition/Full-Service Management:**  
CGS Higher Education Resources  
**Senior Production Editor:** Douglas Bell  
**Senior Operations Specialist:** Brian Mackey  
**Image Interior Permission  
Coordinator:** Nancy Seise

**Image Cover Permission Coordinator:**  
Cathy Mazzucca & Karen Sanatar  
**Photo Researcher:** Francelle Carapetyan  
**Manager, Rights and Permissions:**  
Charles Morris  
**Text Permissions:** Warren Drabek  
**Cover Design:** Axell Designs  
**Cover Image:** James Abbot McNeill Whistler,  
American, (1834–1903). "Arrangement in  
Black and Gray; The Artist's Mother," 1871,  
oil on canvas, 57 × 64 1/2 in. Louvre. Art  
Resource/Musee du Louvre.  
**Printer/Binder:** Edwards Brothers  
**Cover Printer:** Coral Graphics

Credits and acknowledgements borrowed from other sources and reproduced, with permission, in this textbook appear on appropriate page within text.

Copyright © 2011 by Sylvan Barnet.

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. This publication is protected by Copyright and permission should be obtained from the publisher prior to any prohibited reproduction, storage in a retrieval system, or transmission in any form or by means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or likewise. To obtain permission to use material from this work, please submit a written request to Pearson Education, Inc., Permissions Department, One Lake Street, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 07458.

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Library of Congress information is on file.

10987654321

**Prentice Hall**  
is an imprint of

**PEARSON**

[www.pearsonhighered.com](http://www.pearsonhighered.com)

Student Edition  
ISBN 10 020-570825-0  
ISBN 13 978-020-570825-3

Examination Copy  
ISBN 10 020-579052-6  
ISBN 13 978-020-579052-4