

## Literacy Tips



Tips for middle school educators on various topics such as grammar, writing, reading, spelling, vocabulary, cooperative learning and more.

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### Tip #67: Compare/Contrast

Reading nonfiction successfully is a challenge for our middle school students. Knowing the patterns of nonfiction can make it easier for them to understand their reading. Our students know the narrative story structure because they have been immersed in it for most of their education. They easily recognize the beginning, middle, and end concept of telling/writing a story. The cadence is familiar because of the read alouds they have been exposed to through family and school. Although they get practice with nonfiction text in the elementary grades, there is a real shift in the emphasis at middle school with 45-minute daily content area classes. We can help students navigate this genre of literature by teaching them text features (see Literacy Tip #8) and the most common organizational patterns. Compare and contrast is one such pattern.

#### ***Model of Compare and Contrast***

Use pp. 312 - 313 in the *Write Source 2000* to show a model of compare and contrast. The article is on the differences between fossil fuels and solar power. Using highlighted text, students quickly see how the writer organized the details within the article. A Venn diagram serves as a perfect note-taking device for compare and contrast.

#### ***H-Map***

Tired of the Venn diagram graphic organizer? Perhaps you might like to try an H-Map. It is hard to "draw" this for you. On the left-hand side of the **H**, students list the characteristics of one topic. (Place the category heading at the top of the H so students can write a list. I couldn't get Outlook to format it like that.) On the right-hand side, do the same for the next topic. Finally, underneath the horizontal bar of the **H**, students list what the two topics have in common.

Fossil Fuels **H** Solar Power  
Similarities

([A better drawing of it](#) in case you can't visualize what I am trying to say.)

#### ***Selections from other subjects***

Ask your social studies, math, or science teacher to locate a selection from their textbooks that uses compare/contrast as an organizational pattern. Use this as guided practice in the language arts classroom, or ask your teammates to consider reinforcing this organizational pattern in their classes.



## ***Practicing***

Providing time to write with this organizational pattern will help students understand it more fully. Begin with a compare/contrast paragraph. *Step Up to Writing* has an excellent sequence to follow on 3-21 through 3-29 (second edition) and 3-25 through 3-38 (first edition).

## ***Choose one or the other***

Because a paragraph is a limited amount of writing, it is recommended that the writer choose to focus more on similarities or differences. It is very difficult and not necessary to do both. Have students compare animals, shoes, or family members. *Step Up* provides a [word bank of common compare/contrast words](#). (*Write Source 2000* has a similar word bank on p.106.) Begin with a word sort where students categorize these words and then add more of their own. Tell students to cut the words out along the dotted lines. For a more open-ended sorting activity, don't tell them what the category headings should be. Let them come up with their own connections and discuss those. Someone might sort by number of syllables; another student might sort by beginning letter, etc. It's always interesting. If no one comes up with sorting my similarities and differences, have them do it again with those as category headings. Color-coding the similarities and differences might help when students put these to use in their paragraphs and essays.

## ***Essay Writing***

Next move into essay writing. Compare / contrast is an excellent way to teach expository writing. Students must learn basic methods to organize. The two most common are **parallel** and **integrated** structures.

**Parallel structure** is where you address all of one topic in the body of the essay followed by

another paragraph addressing the other topic. In doing this, a writer introduces characteristics of each topic in a similar order. It makes for a neat and tidy 4--paragraph essay. For example, let me compare/contrast wolves and dogs. It might look something like this:

Introduction

Body ¶ - wolves (habitat, diet, appearance)

Body ¶ - dogs (habitat, diet, appearance)

Conclusion

**Integrated structure** can be thought of as a ping-pong game. Each body paragraph bounces back and forth, point by point. With this kind of essay, devote an entire body paragraph to each characteristic.

Introduction

Body ¶ on habitat (alternate back and forth between wolves and dogs)

Body ¶ on diet (alternate back and forth between wolves and dogs)

Body ¶ on appearance (alternate back and forth between wolves and dogs)

Conclusion

In either organization, students can use the compare/contrast word bank to help them write the thesis statement and to transition from paragraph to paragraph. A student might go back and highlight all their similarities in one color and all of their differences in another color.

[Attached is a model essay](#) using the integrated structure. It compares and contrast yellow jackets and honeybees. [Also attached is a student sample](#) (mistakes are included) comparing and contrasting wolves and German shepherds. Both are of from the new *Write Source* (2005), grade 7 student text.



## ***Evaluation Station***

Although we don't have Houghton Mifflin as a language arts text, their on-line support, Evaluation Station, can help students with the compare/contrast essays. Students are asked a set of questions about their essay. There are three answer choices: 1) Yes, 2) I'm not sure, and 3) End Evaluation. Encourage students to click "I am not sure." A tutorial window comes up for each teaching point, which is quite well done.

[www.eduplace.com/kids/hme/6\\_8/evalstation/6/compare/intro.html](http://www.eduplace.com/kids/hme/6_8/evalstation/6/compare/intro.html)

Evaluation station with tips for grades 6-8 from Houghton Mifflin

## ***Books vs. Movies***

With so many movies produced based on authentic children's literature, comparing and contrasting the book vs. the movie form of the literature is always a motivating topic. (*Harry Potter*, *Holes*, *Freak the Mighty*, *The Polar Express*, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, *Jumanji*, etc.)

## ***Professional sites for you***

[www.delmar.edu/engl/wrtctr/handouts/comp\\_cont.htm](http://www.delmar.edu/engl/wrtctr/handouts/comp_cont.htm)

(Good explanation of how to write a comparison/contrast essay. Suggests that a compare/contrast essay should be equally balanced.)

[www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/documents/CompAnalysis.html](http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/documents/CompAnalysis.html)

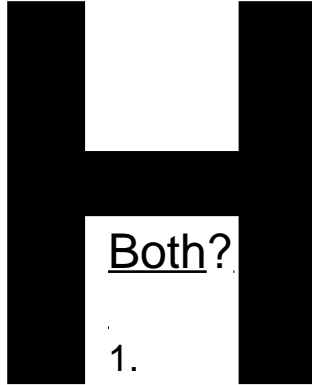
(Although a university web site, this discusses how to write a "lens" paper, which might add the differentiation needed to challenge our gifted students. A "lens" paper favors one side over the other.)



# The H-Map: An Alternative to the Venn Diagram

Fossil Fuels

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

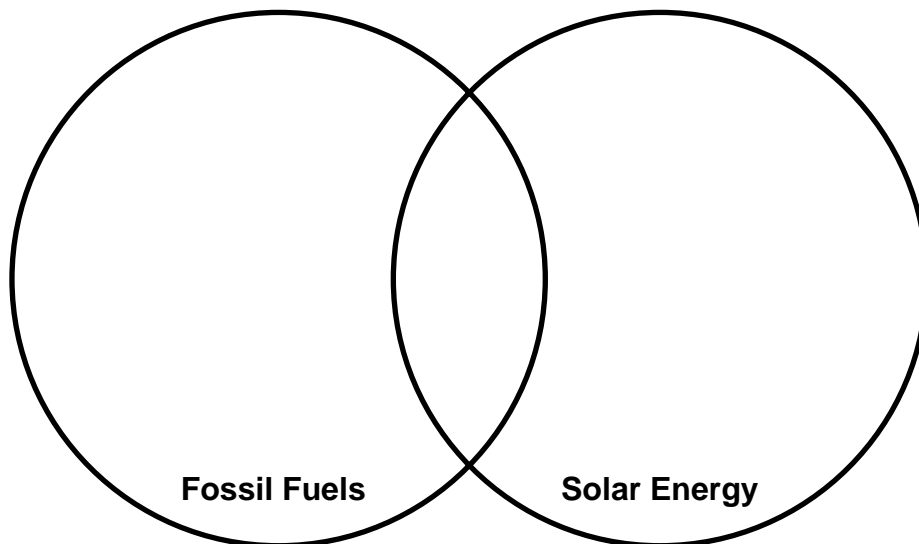


- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Solar Power

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

## Venn Diagram



Source: Holt *Elements of Literature* (2005)

# Word Sorts to Stimulate and Build Prior Knowledge

<b>alike</b>	<b>compare</b>	<b>contrast</b>	<b>differ</b>
<b>both</b>	<b>indentical</b>	<b>while</b>	<b>like</b>
<b>opposite</b>	<b>resemble</b>	<b>similar</b>	<b>same</b>
<b>unlike</b>	<b>however</b>	<b>although</b>	<b>vary</b>
<b>whereas</b>	<b>also</b>	<b>as</b>	<b>even though</b>

## What's the Buzz?

Last summer, my grandma's backyard overflowed with flowers and with stinging insects. At first, whenever I heard a buzz, I grabbed the flyswatter. Then Grandma showed me that not all buzzes are created equal. For example, honeybees and yellow jackets (wasps) may look similar, but they're really very different creatures.

At first glance, anybody could mistake a honeybee for a yellow jacket. Both are about an inch long, with black and yellow stripes on their abdomens. Also, both have a pair of wings that buzz as they fly. A closer look shows differences, though. First, honeybees are fuzzy, but yellow jackets have a smooth, hard skin. Second, honeybees have little pollen baskets on their legs, while yellow jackets have none. Third, each insect has a stinger, but a honeybee uses its stinger only as a last defense. It actually dies after it stings once. A yellow jacket can sting over and over and not die.

Honeybees and yellow jackets have completely different diets. Honeybees eat honey, of course. They make it out of flower nectar, which is a sweet liquid that flowers create. As honeybees go from flower to flower, they pollinate the plants. That's why people want as many honeybees around as possible. Yellow jackets, on the other hand, don't pollinate flowers. If a yellow jacket has to choose between a flower and a can of soda, it'll take the soda every time. Yellow jackets also like to eat garbage and even other insects. So, if a honeybee comes to your window box, it is there to visit the flowers. If a yellow jacket comes, it is probably planning to eat the dead flies in the windowsill.

Both insects build nests, but the two kinds of nests are really different. A honeybee's nest is a honeycomb made out of wax. Many of the little cells inside a honeycomb are full of honey, but others hold pupae, which are baby bees. Yellow jackets make their nests out of a paper-like substance that holds no honey. Another difference between the homes of bees and yellow jackets is their size. Beehives can be very large, with tens of thousands of bees. One queen rules a complicated society, with different jobs for make drones and female

workers and guards. Yellow jackets' nests are usually smaller, with only a dozen or so insects and no complex organization.

Though honeybees and yellow jackets might seem the same, they really are quite different. Honeybees are gentle helpers, but yellow jackets are mean scavengers. Grandma summed it up pretty well: "In my garden, bees are guests, but yellow jackets are pests."

## **The Wolf in the Junkyard**

A 7<sup>th</sup> grader's compare/contrast essay  
(The student essay below contains some errors.)

In a snowey forest, a wolf howls at the moon. What a wild sound! The funny thing is, you can hear the same sound in a city when a neighborhood German shepherd howls at an ambulance. A wolf and a German shepherd might live in different places, but they are similar.

Wolves look very much like German shepherds, with a few differences. Wolves have a wider head, longer legs, bigger feet, and a bushier tail. Most wolves also have coloring that is similar to a German shepherd, grayish brown with black. Wolves and German shepherds are even the same size, with males weighing around a hundred pounds and measuring about 2 1/2 feet tall at the shoulder.

If German shepherds were allowed to choose, they probably would eat the same thing tier wolf cousins eat. Wolves eat mostly creatures with hooves, like deer and reindeer – and even moose. Since their prey is fast and strong, wolves hunt in packs. Most German shepherds eat dog food.

Of course, wolves and German shepherds have completely different places to live. Wolves live in the wild, weather on the arctic tundra, a place without trees, or in the forests of Colorado. They have packs, with an alpha make as the leader. It's the opposite with German shepherds. They live wherever people live, sometimes as housepets and sometimes as junkyard dogs. Most German shepherds have a human family for a pack. Usually the person who feeds the dog most is its "alpha."

So, through they live in different places, wolves and German shepherds are pretty similar. The biggest difference is that a wolf is a wild creature and a German shepherd is a tame dog.

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*Write Source*, grade 7, pp. 196-197

## Student Self-Assessment

### **5 – Ideas**

- I've got a great topic and give a lot of interesting facts about it. Wolves rock!
- I should have said more about what German shepherd eat.

### **4 – Organization**

- I followed my planning chart from beginning to end.
- My ending is weak.

### **4 – Voice**

- Anybody can tell I like this topic.
- My voice sounds a little stale in parts.

### **4 – Word Choice**

- I defined “tundra.”
- I should have defined “alpha” and used more specific words.

### **4 – Sentence Fluency**

- Most of my sentences are easy to read aloud.
- A few spots are a little clunky.

### **3 – Conventions**

- My subjects and verbs agree, and I used commas to set off a definition.
- I might have a few errors.

Mechanics	Organization	Voice	Ideas & Content	Effective Word Choice	Sentence Fluency
<b>M.</b>	<b>O.</b>	<b>V.</b>	<b>I.</b>	<b>E.</b>	<b>S.</b>

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