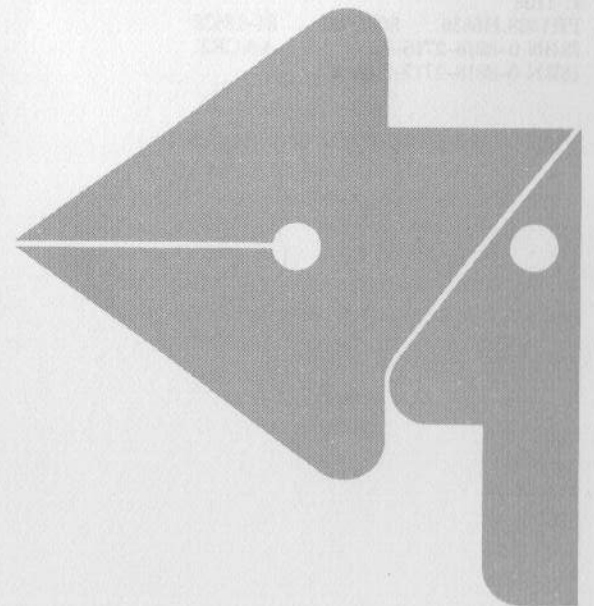


Susan R. Horton is associate professor of English at the University of Massachusetts at Boston. She is the author of *Interpreting Interpreting: Interpreting Dickens's "Dombey and Son"* (also published by Johns Hopkins) and *The Reader in the Dickens World*.

Thinking Through Writing



Susan R. Horton

1982

The Johns Hopkins University Press
Baltimore and London

12

Comparing

When you make a distinction—that is, when you distinguish one thing from another—obviously you are also comparing one thing with another. In this chapter, we will direct our attention to the act of comparing and contrasting. Comparing and contrasting, as anyone who has ever been a student knows, is one of the most common of writing assignments: Compare pre- and post-war Japan; the U.S.S.R. and China; the ideas of Freud and Jung; middle- and working-class values; conservatives and neo-conservatives. The temptation of the beginning writer is to try to make the job more manageable by talking about one thing, and then about the other, without ever comparing them point by point. But the writer's first task when comparing is always to find some common ground that the two people/attitudes/countries/ideas share, and then to move from there to an even closer look, where one can begin to detect distinctions between the two: in the apparent similarities, we find some subtle differences. That is the essence of comparing and contrasting.

It might help us to begin with a simple comparison and contrast—a description of a meeting between poet W. H. Auden and composer Igor Stravinsky. It appeared in the *New York Review of Books*.

Robert Craft.

“The Poet and the Rake”

The dinner in the restaurant of the Hotel Raleigh that night (March 31, 1948) was memorable mainly as a study in con-

trasts: in culture, temperament, and mind—as well as appearance, for the shabby, dandruff-speckled, and slightly peculiar-smelling poet (attributes easily offset by his purity of spirit and intellectual punctiliousness) could not have been more unlike the neat, sartorially perfect, and faintly eau-de-cologned composer. At table, too, while the poet demolished his lamb chops, potatoes, and sprouts, as if eating were a chore to be accomplished as quickly as possible, and gulped Stravinsky's carefully chosen Château Margaux, oblivious to its qualities, the composer fussed over his food, and sniffed, sipped, and savored the wine.

These habits illustrate an essential difference between the two men. With Auden the senses seemed to be of negligible importance, whereas with Stravinsky the affective faculties were virtual instruments of thought. Powerful observer though Auden was, he displayed little interest in the visual sense, being purblind to painting for example, and even to “poetic” nature, for he was more concerned with the virtues of gardening than with the beauty of flowers. And whatever the acuteness of his aural sense, the idea of music appealed to him more than music itself, music with words—opera and Anglican hymns—more than Haydn quartets. That the music of Auden's poetry is not its strongest feature, therefore, should hardly surprise us. A conceptualizer in quest of intellectual order, he was a social, moral, and spiritual diagnostician above all.

To return to the contrasts between poet and composer, though both were religious men, equally keen on dogmas, ritual, faith in the redemptive death, the poet had evidently arrived at his beliefs through theology, the composer through “mystical experience” (however diligently he may have applied himself to the *Grammar of Assent*). Theology, at any rate, was a frequent topic in Auden's conversation with Stravinsky, and an exasperating one, except when the poet digressed on Biblical symbolisms (e.g., the moon as the Old Testament, the sun as the New), or on the argument of “*sui generis*” (that “man's image is God-like because the image of every man is unique”). But Auden preferred to theorize about such subjects as angels being “pure intellect,” and to postulate that “If two rectangles, with common points between them, can be described on a face, that face is an angel's”—which

sounds like a put-on but could have been scholastic exertation (pp. 30–31).

You might want to notice the following things about how comparing and contrasting proceeds, for it, too, has a form that you can imitate when you construct your own comparison and contrast essays. First, the essay begins with a summary statement: the meeting was “a study in contrasts.” From that statement, the writer moves to a specific point-for-point comparison: the dress of one; the dress of the other; the attitude toward the senses in the one; the attitude toward the senses in the other; the attitude toward religion in the one; the attitude toward religion in the other.

From this simple example, you can extrapolate principles to use when you are writing a more complex comparison and contrast. If you are asked, say, to compare the communist state in China with that in the U.S.S.R., you will first have to decide which areas to compare, because obviously you can not do a thorough comparing and contrasting, unless you have five years to write a book. You may want to address the issue of how different states have different attitudes about collective labor; how Chinese and Soviet attitudes toward their party leaders are similar and how they are different. But in any case, your primary decision will be the selection of the *grounds* for comparison. You must never simply begin haphazardly talking about one and the other. Perhaps more than any other kind of essay, this kind must be carefully planned and organized.

Below you will find three student essays that compare and contrast. The first compares the mental state of a person who is alone with the mental state of that same person in the company of friends. The second compares life in the Back Bay of Boston with life in Cambridgeport across the river. The third compares the experience of watching football on television with the experience of playing football. Notice in all three cases the ways in which the writer is careful to choose one aspect of each situation and compare that one aspect with the corresponding aspect in the other situation.

1. When I do anything alone, totally separated from, not so much people in general, but my friends, I seem to deeply

ponder and become depressed. My mind, enhanced by solitude and yearning for someone to talk to, seems to wander aimlessly; about other people around me, about myself, about objects around me. Some of these people are seemingly just like me, alone and sort of depressed looking. But I wonder if they're sitting there thinking the same things about me. Many times, this is really a good time for my mind, sitting alone and contemplating, not about anything in particular, but just thinking. The funny thing about this whole thinking ordeal is that one feels depressed when actually one is not. After a while when friends finally do appear and join you, the whole scene changes. So instead of the little world you were previously in, sharing yourself and your thoughts with yourself alone, you are now sharing them with others, which is the way it's supposed to be. You now become involved in a group and seem to forget about those other people and objects that were so prominent before. But if you happen to look around, you'll notice those same people still there, the same as before, alone and depressed; just waiting for their friends to come and rescue them from their own little world of solitude.

2. In the Back Bay, life is secretive: people are reluctant to acknowledge others on the street, and a constant suspicion lurks in their eyes. They timidly lead docile dogs along uneven sidewalks, and retreat to their households when darkness ensues. Although some suspicion exists in Cambridgeport, life is less inhibited there. Children curse as they play stickball in the streets, and the elderly infrequently take walks at night. Even the dogs are more bold. They man the corners, bark vociferously and defend their territory from invading mongrels.

Yes, life is different in the Back Bay—indeed, death seems to prevail. The Fens, the only vegetation for blocks and blocks, boasts bent trees with grey-green leaves, and a miasmatic pond, reeking of sulfur. On a moonlit night, hideous muskrats can be seen skimming the sordid water, as addicts and alcoholics scurry through the park, seeking their pleasure for the evening.

Though Cambridgeport is not exactly dying, it suffers from despair. Poverty and ignorance prevail in the neighborhood: post-adolescent pool sharks relive high school days; teenage girls on welfare mother illegitimate children, and arguments ring from nearly every window. But death has not quite won. People still hope for winning combinations, and occasionally they laugh at their hopeless predicament. And in the back of a few run-down houses, a humble garden may be found.

Certainly both neighborhoods must have experienced a more prosperous era. The austere architecture of the Back Bay suggests it was once inhabited by white collar workers and pseudo-socialites who ventured through the Fens to Symphony Hall. Cambridgeport's worn benches and many archaic churches imply it was once a middle class mecca. Meek white families probably crowded the streets, and Sundays were sober days, not restless, hungover ones. However, only shadows of those periods exist now, and if I must live in shadows, I will live in shadows where there is at least an occasional smile, and where the elderly still walk at night.

3. When I watch a football game I'm restless. I can't sit and watch the game yet I can't leave the room. I'm uncertain of the results and I feel almost cowardly when I realize I'm worrying about losing a little money. But when I play I'm calm and confident. I know what I can do and I know I do it well. My every move is fluid as I comfortably cover my position; there is no place else in the world I would rather be at that moment.

Playing, the sweat feels good on my face; I flick out my tongue and savor its salty taste. I feel clean and purified. As I watch the game I don't sweat, I perspire. I feel foolish for reacting that way in an air-conditioned barroom. It's uncomfortable as my neck chafes against my shirt collar; I feel like an out of shape old man who'd just vainly run to catch a bus. While on the field, no such discomfort haunts me.

When I watch I am uncertain of the results, unsure of the actions of the players. In contrast, as I play, perhaps

I'm a fool but I believe I can control the actions of the game.

Football is an extremely physical game and I like it. I enjoy playing off a blocker twice my size and, head down, making a thunderous tackle. Watching the contact on TV or in the stands leaves me feeling somehow empty. "I should be out there. I'm young and healthy; I should be playing instead of sitting in this barroom, drinking beer, waiting for cash rewards."

As I see a defender intercept a pass, I scream, "Out of bounds! Out of bounds you fool before you fumble!" But when I intercept there is no such chant running through my mind. The ball is rare in the hands of a defender, but I have confidence. I can see the goal line and I know I can score. In the barroom my breathing is unsteady as I'm constantly grasping for air; on the field, with the ball in my hand, it's even and almost melodious. I'm graceful, as I follow my blockers, sidestep a would-be tackler. In the bar nothing is safe: drinks, chairs, and tables all fall prey to my awkward gropings.

When I play I am blinded by loyalty. "My team is the best and we are certain of victory." When I watch no such pride or cause binds me. I am a mercenary, making the percentage bet, the one that will pay the most. When I watch, no sense of loyalty guides me, only my wallet. I am by far, prouder of playing the game than of betting on it.

Perhaps it's foolish to take such pride in playing a game, but I do. If we win I'm ecstatic. We worked hard and were rewarded. The feelings are abstract and different for each player but they're still very real. In contrast, betting to me is like a job. I read the sports pages, study the teams, and sit in the bar waiting for the sucker who's certain his alma mater or hometown team can't lose. I get no pleasure from winning a bet.

When I look within myself I'm not really sure why I bet. It helps make ends meet; it keeps my gas tank on full and I guess I don't hate it as much as I say. But, when I have a choice, the money can go to hell, because you can be sure I'll be out there on some dusty old ballpark turf playing away the biggest prize of all as a reward. The sense

of accomplishment is out there for me, the feeling of doing, not watching, of being there sweaty and alive. No amount of money can make me feel so alive.

All three student essays are fine in that the writers struggle with something that is real and give shape to a perception and an experience in ways that they and their readers care about. In each case the writer has a voice that is strong, personable, at ease and at the same time struggling to comprehend and convey what he or she feels. *That* is the voice of the true essayist.



72. Using the student essays as models, consider a subject that you may want to explore in a short essay that compares and contrasts two places, two attitudes, two states of mind. Write that essay.

73. Writing one's own comparison and contrast essay may be quite a bit easier than writing an essay in which you compare and contrast the ideas of two or more writers. This is more difficult because the task is not singular. There are several jobs you need to do. First, you have to read carefully to be sure you understand exactly what each writer is saying. Second, you have to do some translating. That is, you have to determine which word or term in one writer's essay is comparable to which word or term in another writer's essay. Third, you have to construct the comparison itself. And at this point your job is to decide which of those similar terms are precisely equivalent to one another, and which are not. And among those that are not quite equivalent, your job is to decide at which points they are the same, and at which they are different. Below you will find several extracts from writers who are all talking about the same process. Read through the passages carefully several times, trying to understand them as well as you can. The passages are very difficult; therefore you should not be distressed if you find it takes you some time to do this. After you have read them, I will offer some suggestions to help you construct a comparison and contrast essay in which you compare the ideas in one passage with those in the others.

1. [Biologists] usually proceed in such a way that from certain facts gained by analysis we sketch a picture of the whole organism, which in turn, so long as we encounter discrepancies between this picture and factual experience, stimulates further questions and investigations. Upon the basis of new inquiries the picture of the whole is again modified, and the process of discovering new discrepancies and making new inquiries follows, and so on. By such empirical procedure in a dialectical

manner, a progressively more adequate knowledge of the nature of the organism, of its "essence," is acquired, and an increasingly correct evaluation of the observed facts, and of whether or not they are essential to the organism is obtained. . . . As skepticism toward a naive copy-theory of knowledge grew, and as it was realized that "empirical" facts are not a simple expression of reality but are also produced through the method of investigation, it became more and more clear that it was the task of natural science to transcend "empirical" facts and create images, "symbols," which are suited for gaining a coherent understanding of the "facts." (Kurt Goldstein, *Human Nature in the Light of Psychopathology*, pp. 26–27.)

2. Every attempt to order the world, to make sense of it, involves a testing of epistemic bonds [linkages between something that we discover and something that is public knowledge]. Mentally, we run back and forth between our postulations and our experiences. Our theories of the world, whether commonsensical or scientific, inevitably contain concepts by postulation so that, with Einstein, we know the public world—the reliable and objective world—"only by speculative means."

The operations we employ in coming to know the world scientifically are operations whose meanings are given by our speculations. Without an embedding in theory, the operations may become as senseless as Benjamin's construction of *hage* [this is a name for a hypothetical concept that could refer to "height plus age" and has no useful purpose.] On the other hand, theories without operations become so flexible as to defy falsification. Operation-free, they can be stretched to explain anything that happens—after the event.

Such unfalsifiable world-views gratify many men. They are called "faiths" to distinguish them, by degree, from those theories that permit a test of the epistemic bond against observable events. The advantage of faiths is that they order and gratify. Their disadvantage is that, devoid of operational meaning, they are immune to disproof and useless for prediction. (Gwynn Nettler, *Explanations*, p. 22.)

3. [Scientists] start with a *problem*, such as the problem of the planets at the time of Plato. This problem (which will be discussed in a somewhat idealized form) is not merely the result of *curiosity*, it is a *theoretical result*. It is due to the fact that certain *expectations* have been disappointed: on the one hand it seems to be clear that the stars must be divine, hence one expects them to behave in an orderly and lawful manner. On the other hand, one cannot find any easily discernible regularity. The planets, to all intents and purposes, move in a quite chaotic fashion. How can this fact be reconciled with the expectation and with the principles that underlie the expectation? Does it show that the expectation is mistaken? Or have we failed in our analysis of the facts? This is the problem.

It is important to see that the elements of the problem are not simply *given*. The "fact" of irregularity, for example, is not accessible without further ado. It cannot be discovered by just anyone who has healthy eyes and a good mind. It is only through a certain expectation that it

becomes an object of our attention. Or, to be more accurate, this fact of irregularity *exists* because there is an expectation of regularity. In our case the rule (which is a more specific part of the expectation) asserts a circular motion with constant angular velocity. The fixed stars agree with this rule and so does the sun, if we trace its path relative to the fixed stars. The planets do not obey the rule, neither directly, with respect to earth, nor indirectly, with respect to the fixed stars.

To sum up this part of the [Karl] Popperian doctrine: research starts with a problem. The problem is the result of a conflict between an expectation and an observation which in turn is constituted by the expectation. It is clear that this doctrine differs from the doctrine of inductivism where objective facts enter a passive mind and leave their traces there. (Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method*, pp. 171–72.)

As I promised, the extracts are difficult, but perhaps these questions and procedures will help you make sense of them and start you on the way to an essay in which you compare these writers. These same questions and procedures ought to be of some help whenever you write a comparison and contrast essay.

1. Look for words that recur in the extracts. In this case, the recurrence of words such as *facts*, *observation*, *theory*, ought to help you know what the writers are talking about. Look for other such words.
2. I have said that all of these writers are talking about a process. In a sentence or two, explain what that process is.
3. Remember what we have said about words that are always central to analysis; for example, *nature*, *source*, and *function*. Apply each of those words to *each* of these writers. What, for instance, is the *function* of the process described? What does it yield? Answer these questions for one of the writers, and then for another. What is the *nature* of the process? That is, how does it actually work? Answer that question for each of the writers.
4. Can you do what we did with Gore Vidal's passage in Chapter 5? That is, can you see what the *shape* of each writer's paragraph is? Is there a causal chain in the paragraphs of any of these writers? A gradual progression forward?
5. Are there traces of an *image* that could be visualized and that might help you understand what is being said? We will work on this tactic much more in the next chapter, but for now look closely at phrases like "running back and forth." *Picture* those things in your mind's eye. What do they tell you about how the writers see the process they describe? You might even want to sketch what each writer is describing.
6. Can you detect which term each writer *opposes* to which other terms? See if you can list the oppositions each writer sees.
7. Maybe the best way to force yourself to find similar or equivalent terms is to construct what Ann E. Berthoff calls "grain elevators." These are columns you construct, lining up terms that are equivalent or similar in one writer and another. See an example of this on the next page.

| Column A | Goldstein (b) | Nettler (c) | Feyerabend (d) |
|------------------|---|---|---|
| Need | "adequate knowledge of the essence of the organism" | "coming to know the world scientifically" | "reconciling what we observe, and our expectations of what we observe" |
| How It Is Served | from available facts, sketching a picture of the whole | running back and forth from our postulations to our experiences | noting irregularity, and trying to come to understand that irregularity |
| End Product | the creation of "symbols" suitable for explaining the "facts" | the creation of a theory that permits us to test it | not expressed in the excerpt |

Berthoff notes that in order for this tactic to work, you must be sure that your separate "elevators" are free standing and, of course, that the items you place across from each other are parallel or equivalent.

8. After you have constructed "elevators," you can force yourself to formulate specific statements that will, in their turn, force you to clarify points of similarity and difference. They might take these forms: "If for [Feyerabend] the _____ is _____, for [Goldstein, Nettler] it is _____."
 9. You can also, of course, return to the series of reading questions listed in Chapter 5 and go through the entire list of procedures there. You can, that is, ask such questions as what are the central concepts being discussed (in this case they are *experience*, *expectation*, *fact*, *new ideas*, and so on), and you can then ask yourself how those separate concepts are related to one another by each writer.
 10. If we assume that all of these writers are taking somewhat different positions about the same issue, might it not be possible for you to think of these positions as part of a *continuum*? Can you, that is, rank them along a scale of most to least radical? (When I say radical, I do not mean politically radical, of course, but most extreme or most drastic.) Who would you put at the most drastic or extreme end of that continuum, and who on the other end, and where would the other writers fall? Discerning the answer to a question such as this is also deciding how to organize your essay—because you may want to talk about the most extreme position first, the second most extreme position second, and so on. As usual, the organization of your essay will be determined by your thinking, and not by reference to any "rules" of writing.
74. Now that you have composed a comparison and contrast essay based on the writings above, try doing the same thing with the following three short

excerpts. In this case also, follow the suggestions given in the last few pages and keep in mind particularly the notion that these three writers may be placed on a continuum. That is, which writer takes the most drastic position, and which the least drastic, and in what ways?

1. The original doctrines of art's "usefulness" were not offered as attacks upon art. Kant, in proposing "purposiveness without purpose" as a formula for the aesthetic, had no intention of providing a "refutation" of art. His formula did, however, mark the emergence of the "use" criterion which was subsequently to place all purely intellectual pursuits upon a defensive basis. His proposition could be readily perverted: if the aesthetic had no purpose outside itself, the corollary seemed to be that the aesthetic had no result outside itself. Logically there was no cogency in such an argument, but psychologically there was a great deal. And the damage was perhaps increased through attempts to justify art by the postulating of a special "art instinct" or "aesthetic sense."

On the face of it, this was a good move. For a time when instincts were gaining considerably in repute, and no complicated human mind could rouse us to admiration so promptly as the routine acts of an insect, what could be more salubrious for the reputation of art than the contention that art satisfies an "instinctive need"? The trouble arose from the fact that the "art instinct" was associated with the "play instinct," thus becoming little more than an adult survival from childhood. The apologists still in the Kantian scheme, associated art with play because both seemed, from the standpoint of utility, purposeless. But in an age when "work" was becoming one of society's catch-words, art could not very well be associated with play without some loss of prestige. (Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change*, pp. 72-73.)

2. A work of art can be either "received" or "used." When we "receive" it we exert our senses and imagination and various other powers according to a pattern invented by the artist. When we "use" it we treat it as assistance for our own activities. The one, to use an old-fashioned image, is like being taken for a bicycle ride by a man who knows roads we have never yet explored. The other is like adding one of those little motor attachments to our own bicycle and then going for one of our familiar rides. These rides may in themselves be good, bad, or indifferent. The "uses" which the many make of the arts may or may not be intrinsically vulgar, depraved, or morbid. That's as may be. "Using" is inferior to "reception" because art, if used rather than received, merely facilitates, brightens, or palliates our life, and does not add to it. (C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, p. 88.)
3. A self-directed enjoyment of nature seems to me to be something forced. More naturally, as well as more properly, we take a self-forgetful pleasure in the sheer alien pointless independent existence of animals, birds, stones, and trees. "Not how the world is, but that it is, is the mystical."

I take this starting point, not because I think it is the most important place of moral change, but because I think it is the most accessible one. It is so patently a good thing to take delight in flowers and animals

that people who bring home potted plants and watch kestrels might even be surprised at the notion that these things have anything to do with virtue. The surprise is a product of the fact that, as Plato pointed out, beauty is the only spiritual thing which we love by instinct. When we move from beauty in nature to beauty in art we are already in a more difficult region. The experience of art is more easily degraded than the experience of nature. A great deal of art, perhaps most art, actually is self-consoling fantasy, and even great art cannot guarantee the quality of its consumer's consciousness. However, what is great can have its effect. Art, and by "art" from now on I mean good art, not fantasy art, affords us a pure delight in the independent existence of what is excellent. Both in its genesis and its enjoyment it is a thing totally opposed to selfish obsession. It invigorates our best faculties and, to use Platonic language, inspires love in the highest parts of the soul. It is able to do this partly by virtue of something which it shares with nature: a perfection of form which invites unpossessive contemplation and resists absorption into the selfish dream of the consciousness. (Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, pp. 85-86.)

75. We said at the beginning of this book that *all* writing is in a crucial sense a response to what someone else has written or said; all writing picks up where someone else left off. This is particularly true in the above excerpts, in which the reader is almost bound to feel somewhat like an eavesdropper listening in on someone else's argument. But that is the usual condition of the reader and writer. To turn that condition to your own use, try this exercise: imagine what may have prompted each of these writers to say the things he or she says. What attitudes are all three responding to and reacting against? In that more contemporary formulation, "Where are they coming from?" How does knowing where they are coming from help you to understand what they are saying and why they are saying it?