

• ACTIVITY •

After rereading “Slam, Dunk, & Hook” and “Fast Break,” continue to fill in the chart with your own observations about some of the poems’ other similarities and differences. In continuing to fill out this graphic organizer, you might add rows for theme, rhythm, allusion, figurative language, or other characteristics that you find significant.

Developing a Thesis Statement

Developing your thesis depends in large measure on the question you’re asked. If your assignment is simply to compare and contrast these two poems, it’s up to you to determine if you want to focus primarily on differences or similarities and then decide which areas or literary elements you will analyze. Keep in mind that the purpose of putting two works (or ideas) next to each other is usually to emphasize something that is not immediately obvious. For instance, the fact that both of these poems are about basketball is pretty obvious; there’s probably not much point in contrasting a dunk with a fast break. However, if you examine how the game affects the players in these poems, you’ll discover more interesting issues, such as how one poem recalls past experience while the other presents the action as if it’s happening now. One presents memories and reflections; the other observes and reports. One is jerky, with a “sprung rhythm,” while the other is more fluid.

If you are given a prompt, you’ll have clearer direction, but it is still up to you to determine the specifics of your analysis. Suppose you are given the following prompt:

Basketball figures prominently in both Yusef Komunyakaa’s “Slam, Dunk, & Hook” and Edward Hirsch’s “Fast Break.” In an essay, compare and contrast the two poems, analyzing the literary devices each writer uses to explore the speaker’s attitude toward the game of basketball.

Even though this prompt is pretty specific, it leaves many questions and decisions up to you. First, it directs you to analyze the literary devices, but it does not indicate which ones. Whether the prompt asks for “literary devices,” “stylistic devices,” “literary techniques,” “resources of language,” “literary elements,” or “formal elements,” you’re being asked to consider the writer’s language. Second, it asks that you “explore the speaker’s attitude toward the game of basketball,” but it doesn’t indicate what that attitude is. So before you can craft a thesis, you need to analyze the poems carefully and think about the themes. How is the relationship between the game and the players in each poem similar or different? Usually you want to begin by finding the common ground, and then note the differences. For instance, you could claim that in both of these poems the speaker attempts to communicate the beauty and excitement of playing basketball. The presentations are, however, quite different. In the Komunyakaa poem, the speaker reflects, identifying memories through imagery, while the speaker in the Hirsch poem observes and reports.

Remember that your thesis should not be too broad:

Basketball is central to both poems, but the poets use it in different ways.

Your thesis should not focus too narrowly on the meaning of the poem without specifying which resources of language you intend to discuss:

In both poems, the game of basketball is the means the poets use to dramatize the way the speaker is involved with the sport; however, each speaker's involvement is different.

Nor should your thesis focus too narrowly on the resources of language and ignore the theme:

In these two poems, the point of view, images, and rhythmic structure of the two poems are different.

If we balance the two components—attention to the resources of language and attention to meaning—we'll come up with a working thesis:

In both poems, the game of basketball is the means the poets use to dramatize an intense experience; however, the point of view, imagery, and rhythm of the two poems convey very different experiences.

This is only a working thesis, a draft to be used as a starting point—you can tell by the awkward language and repetition. It identifies the specific resources of language the writer will discuss and begins to develop an interpretation of how the poets are using those resources. The following revised thesis statement attempts, in a succinct fashion, to narrow our scope of interpretation while maintaining focus on the resources of language that the poems share:

In these two poems, the point of view, imagery, and rhythm reveal the relationship between the players and the sport they love, but a world of difference separates the experience of basketball for each of the speakers.

Organizing a Comparison and Contrast Essay

After you have created a thesis statement for your comparison and contrast essay, you need to consider how to organize your essay. In general, you have two alternatives:

Text-by-Text Organization

One way to organize a comparison and contrast essay about two literary works is to divide it into a discussion of the works one by one. In the first developmental paragraphs, you could, for instance, discuss literary elements in "Slam, Dunk, & Hook," and then in the next paragraphs, discuss how those same elements are used similarly or differently in "Fast Break." If you are under time constraints, you might write only one paragraph for each poem, but be careful that you don't try to include too much in a single paragraph. Instead, be sure that your paragraphs are clearly focused and supported and that you draw connections between the two texts.

Let's consider an outline for an essay responding to the prompt about "Slam, Dunk, & Hook" and "Fast Break."

Thesis

Although both Komunyakaa and Hirsch depict basketball as a transformative experience, the rhythm and imagery in the poems show just how different those experiences are.

Topic Sentence 1

In "Slam, Dunk, & Hook," the prevalent images of struggle alongside the fragmented rhythm of the verse suggest that life is a battleground both on and off the court for the players.

Topic Sentence 2

In "Fast Break," the fluid structure and positive connotations of the words in the poem suggest that the players are achieving a singular moment of grace on the court, which is intended to be appreciated as fine art.

If you are faced with time constraints or a restricted length, you might find this text-by-text approach especially useful. An essay developed from this outline, for instance, addresses the prompt and, with the inclusion of strong textual support, could result in an insightful reading of the two poems. Its structure is essentially two sections—one poem, then the next. This logical pattern can be effective as long as the introduction and conclusion emphasize the connections between the two poems that are analyzed in the body paragraphs.

Element-by-Element Organization

The alternative is to organize the paragraphs around the literary elements you want to discuss. In the case of the thesis we're working with here, you could analyze the speaker in both poems, then the imagery in both poems, then the rhythmic structure in both poems. Should each paragraph refer to both works? In most instances, yes, but there are no hard and fast rules. If you have a lot to say about one of the literary elements you're analyzing, then break the discussion into two paragraphs, one on each poem. As always, form follows function when you are organizing an essay. Rather than a template, your own ideas and the material should guide your decisions about the best way to present an analysis.

The chief advantage of this element-by-element organization is that you are comparing and contrasting as you go, rather than waiting until the end. After a topic sentence that focuses on the point you want to make, you would offer evidence from both poems, reminding the reader of the impact of the difference or similarity.

Consider this outline for an essay organized according to literary elements:

Thesis

In these two poems, the point of view, images, and rhythmic structure reveal the relationship between the players and the sport they love, but a world of difference separates the experience of basketball for each of the speakers.

Topic Sentence 1

Though both poems are told from a first-person point of view, the speakers are connected to the game in different ways.

Topic Sentence 2

While the two poets use syntax in a different manner, in both cases it establishes a rhythm that reflects the pace of the game.

Topic Sentence 3

The diction and imagery reflect the meaning of the game of basketball to each speaker.

Transitions

Because you must juggle two works in a comparison and contrast essay, it is especially important that your transitions are effective. Here are some words and phrases you might use to help keep your work and its intentions clear:

COMPARISON TRANSITIONS	CONTRAST TRANSITIONS
in comparison	in contrast
compared to	on the one hand . . . on the other hand
like	conversely
similar to	on the contrary
likewise	unlike
also	however
similarly	although
in the same way	yet
as in . . . , so in the other	still
moreover	but
	even though
	nevertheless
	regardless
	despite
	while

Documenting Sources

In a comparison and contrast essay, you will have two sources, so while you probably won't need a formal Works Cited page, you might be asked to use parenthetical citations in which you identify the work by the writer's name and line number:

Described as a "roundhouse / Labyrinth" (Komunyakaa ll. 6-7), the basketball court . . .

Described as an "orange blur" (Hirsch l. 33), the descending basketball . . .

If the author of the work is introduced in the sentence, just use the line number:

Komunyakaa describes the players' movement as "spun . . . Through a lyric slipknot / Of joy" (ll. 38-39) . . .

A Sample Comparison and Contrast Essay

Following is a sample essay that follows the element-by-element form of comparison. Read it, and then discuss the questions that follow.

One Game, Two Lives

Talat Rubin

There are many different types of streets in our world, some paved with gold and others with potholes. In the poems "Fast Break" by Edward Hirsch and "Slam, Dunk, & Hook" by Yusef Komunyakaa, each poet captures the essence of the game of basketball and its meaning to the players they depict. While the only piece of equipment needed is a hoop and a ball, the manner and tone of each game differs from community to community. Indeed, the manner of playing in the community of each poet is quite different. I fear that the players in Komunyakaa's "Slam, Dunk, & Hook" would make mincemeat out of Hirsch's players in "Fast Break." In these two poems, the point of view, images, and rhythmic structure reveal the relationship between the players and the sport they love, but a world of difference separates the experience of basketball for each of the speakers.

Though both poems are told from a first-person point of view, the speakers are connected to the game in different ways. Hirsch's speaker seems to be observing as a reporter, a member of the audience. Yet the description of "our gangly starting center" makes it sound as if the speaker is on the team himself and right in the action. Told in the present tense and described moment-by-moment, this perspective adds excitement to the poem because we feel that we're with the speaker, watching the action unfold. In contrast, Komunyakaa's poem is written as the memory of past events. "We outmaneuvered," he recalls; "we could almost / Last forever," he reflects, and "we knew we were / Beautiful & dangerous." The speaker's tone indicates an experience that he has considered and examined. The

fact that he remembers so vividly and intensely emphasizes the lasting importance the game had (or has) for him.

While the two poets use syntax in a different manner, in both cases it establishes a rhythm that reflects the pace of the game. In Komunyakaa's poem, sentence fragments along with the abundant use of periods and commas within sentences emphasize the poem's truncated beat, which could be the beat of a basketball bouncing off the court, or the heartbeat of the players in excited motion. The abrupt and short lines suggest a combative and harsh pace. In contrast, Hirsch's poem is one long sentence divided into couplets through enjambment, creating a fluid rhythm to express the grace in this one continuous play. The long sentence, consisting of multiple clauses and descriptive phrases, suggests that this poem, like the play, is a team effort dependent on many small parts. The different syntax of these poems defines the rhythm of two different games.

The diction and imagery reflect the meaning of the game of basketball to each speaker. Hirsch's words have positive connotations: "kisses," "cherished possession," and "together" demonstrate his sense of companionship that is fostered in the sport. They are not mere fellow team members, but "brothers" who share a common purpose. This point is made explicit when the speaker refers to the forward who is playing "the game he loved like a country." Komunyakaa's word choice reflects the energy and anger expended during the game. The players are not merely young men—they are almost god-like, with "Mercury's / Insignia on [their] sneakers." Komunyakaa evokes the shattering of a young man's emotional core when the "backboard splintered" in his attempt to forget about the loss of his mother. The language expresses the aggressive manner in which they play, as well as the society they come from. It is an aggressive game where even their graceful motions have violent undertones—they "glide" not like sparrows, but like "sparrow hawk[s]". Yet while Komunyakaa's basketball is a more physical demonstration of the game than Hirsch's, the same vitality of spirit can be found in each poem. Like Komunyakaa's players who "rolled the ball off [their] / Fingertips," Hirsch's lay the ball "gently / against the glass."

These two poets create different visions of their world and game by the imagery they employ. Hirsch creates a gentler, more tender image as a "hook shot kisses the rim." In contrast, Komunyakaa uses imagery of war, power, and brute force: the players are alternately "storybook sea monsters," birds of prey, and boys with god-like speed. Basketball was not merely a game to the speaker in "Slam, Dunk, & Hook," but a battle, similar, we can assume, to the one he waged outside the court.

In their poems, Edward Hirsch and Yusef Komunyakaa describe the physical dimensions of the sport of basketball. In doing so, they not only articulate the meaning of a moment of time in their players' lives, but also expose the world in which they live. Komunyakaa's game has its origin on the streets, and his diction demonstrates the roughness of those streets, while Hirsch's graceful depiction of the sport demonstrates a more benign view of the world. For Hirsch, the game is a

beautiful complement to life. For Komunyakaa, it is the battle that is life. It is clear that the poets come from different neighborhoods, different communities, and most likely different time periods. But what is even clearer is the manner in which this simple game, with a round ball, touched and shaped their lives.

Questions

1. Is the introduction effective? Explain why or why not. If you believe it is not effective, how could it be improved?
2. Why are there two separate paragraphs for the analysis of imagery? Explain whether you think that dividing the analysis into two paragraphs was a good decision.
3. In what ways are transitions used within this essay to emphasize the similarities and differences between the poems?
4. Do you agree with the essay's argument? Explain why or why not. Which parts of the interpretation do you find most persuasive? questionable?
5. What other literary elements might you have used to make a similar argument?
6. What suggestions can you offer for polishing the essay?

• ACTIVITY •

Read "Traveling through the Dark" by William Stafford and "Woodchucks" by Maxine Kumin, two poems in which a speaker considers the death of animals. Plan and write a comparison and contrast essay in which you analyze the resources of language Stafford and Kumin use to reveal the relationship between the speakers and the animals.

Traveling through the Dark

WILLIAM STAFFORD

Traveling through the dark I found a deer
dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.
It is usually best to roll them into the canyon:
that road is narrow; to swerve might make more dead.

By glow of the tail-light I stumbled back of the car 5
and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing;
she had stiffened already, almost cold.
I dragged her off; she was large in the belly.

My fingers touching her side brought me the reason—
her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting, 10
alive, still, never to be born.
Beside that mountain road I hesitated.

The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights;
under the hood purred the steady engine.