How to compare texts

Comparing texts can focus on any aspect of the writing. When writing a comparison, it is important to move equally between the two texts, and write about them together, not separately.

# Comparing by purpose

Imagine two different chocolate bars. They both need to satisfy the customer, but one might do it through a biscuit centre and one through the texture of the chocolate. They have the same purpose but different ways of achieving it.

One way to link texts is through the purpose they are aiming to achieve. Two different texts may:

* have the same purpose but achieve it in different ways
* have the same purpose but a different subject
* have the same subject but a different purpose

When comparing texts, consider both what they have in common and what is different about them.

If they have the same purpose:

* Do they use similar techniques? For example, two newspaper articles could use exaggeration to present completely different viewpoints of the same topic.
* Are they aimed at the same kind of audience or different ones? Within two advertisements, the writers will aim to sell their product but will have a different target audience in mind.

If they have a different purpose but the same subject:

* How do they treat it differently? For example, if you are analysing two newspaper articles about the same event in the news, how does the language show how the writer has aimed their writing for a particular audience?
* How have the writers shown a different opinion towards the same subject?

# Example

Look at these headlines, from The Mirror and The Telegraph, from articles reporting the same story. They have the same purpose – to inform people about the landing of a space probe on a comet.

*Rock star*

**The Mirror**

*European Space Agency's Rosetta spacecraft lands probe on comet*

**The Telegraph**

## Analysis

* The Mirror have used a [**pun**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/guides/zpgc4wx/revision#glossary-zyvhb9q), which grabs the attention, playing on the idea that a comet is a rock, and this is a terrific achievement – so it’s like a ‘star’. But a ‘rock star’ plays on ideas of celebrity. It’s a much shorter headline, which might be more able to grab the attention of the reader, but does not necessarily inform them of the topic of the article.
* The Telegraph headline provides a detailed level of information to the reader to indicate the topic of the headline. The headline provides the reader with the name of the spacecraft which adds to the educational tone of the headline. The newspaper uses a longer sentence rather than making use of a particular technique, instead relying on the reader's interest in the topic to attract them to read.
* The difference in the approaches could be because of their different audiences – The Telegraph might be assuming that their audience is already interested in science, whereas The Mirrormight feel they have to attract a reader that may not be interested in the topic of the article.

# Comparing by context

One way that texts can differ is in their context – the time and place that they were written in. A text with the same purpose and subject, aimed at the same audience, will be very different if it was written in the 19th century versus today.

The time a text was written can affect:

* the vocabulary used
* attitudes towards gender and race
* the technology available/mentioned
* who the audience is

The audience might be different because of who has power or money at the time, or even who was likely to be reading. In the 19th century although school was made compulsory and more people could read, only middle and upper class people had the time or money to read for pleasure.

What was happening in history or society at the time can also affect what is written. For example, a text written about voting in the early 20th century would probably mention the suffragette movement, campaigning for women to have the vote. One written in the early 21st century might talk about the idea of 16 year olds getting the vote.

# Example

The following texts are extracts from two book reviews, one from 1847, and one from 2014.

An attempt to give novelty and interest to fiction, by resorting to those singular ‘characters’ that used to exist everywhere, but especially in retired and remote places. The success is not equal to the abilities of the writer; chiefly because the incidents are too coarse and disagreeable to be attractive, the very best being improbable, with a moral taint about them, and the villainy not leading to results sufficient to justify the elaborate pains taken in depicting it. The execution, however, is good: grant the writer all that is requisite as regards matter, and the delineation is forcible and truthful.

Review of Wuthering Heights in The Spectator, 1847

Hornby nicely recreates a certain version of 1960s London – a world in which aspiring actresses work behind the cosmetics counter at Derry & Toms, live in Earls Court bedsits hoarding sixpences for the gas fire, and undertake voice-improvement programmes in which they hone their “best Jean Metcalfe voice”. As the decade develops, the novel traces the emergence of a more fluid new class system of celebrity. Real people, such as Keith Relf from the Yardbirds and Harold Wilson’s political secretary Marcia Williams, have walk-on parts, as if Sophie Straw and the rest are one step away from being real themselves.

Review of Funny Girl by Joe Moran, 2014

## Analysis

* Both texts are aimed at educated audiences – they use a high level of vocabulary, although the language in the extract from 1847 is more formal; this was usual with all written publications at the time.
* The review of Wuthering Heights comments on the ‘moral taint’ in the book. [**Morality**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/guides/zpgc4wx/revision/2#glossary-z86jhyc) was a big concern of the Victorian era. Social ideas were far stricter, and society was far more male-orientated. In contrast, there is no sense of that in the modern text.
* While the 1847 review is clearly judging the book, and its ‘success’, the modern review is more descriptive, telling us about the content of Funny Girl. The judgement is more of a suggestion than an instruction of what to think – such as the placement of the word ‘nicely’ at the beginning of the extract.
* While the 1847 review talks about ‘the writer’, the 2014 review calls Hornby by name. This is also true of the characters. This suggests that 19th century book reviews were more formal.

Sometimes comparing two texts is a useful way to learn more about them: it points out things you would not have realised just looking at one of them. The effectiveness of a text is one of the things which you can see more clearly in comparison: which text achieves its purpose better?

In comparison you can see the effect of making different choices about:

* vocabulary
* imagery
* sentence length and complexity
* paragraph length
* structuring of ideas
* [**rhetorical**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/guides/zpgc4wx/revision/3#glossary-z3t2sbk) devices

You can also make a judgement about which is more effective. This is where your personal opinion and reaction to the text can be included within your analysis.

# Example

Read the two extracts that reported on the exit of the England football team from the World Cup in different ways. Which do you feel is more effective in presenting its viewpoint, and achieving its purpose to inform?

## Article 1

**World cup 2014: Five things England need to do after disappointing exit in Brazil**

Now what? England have been dumped out of the World Cup after just two group games. But what can they do to make sure it isn’t a wasted journey to Brazil?

Steven Gerrard’s face was a study in despair in Sao Paulo. The skipper has been brilliant and loyal England servant, but he knows it’s probably time to pull down the curtain and prolong his club career.

For Frank Lampard, Phil Jagielka and Glen Johnson, too, this is the Three Lions swansong.

Martin Lipton, The Mirror

# Example

## Article 2

**Who should take the blame for England’s early World Cup exit?**

World Cup behind us, the England manager now has the task of turning the latest crop of raw, but undoubtedly talented, young England players into a European force. Their club performances under the expert tutelage of Brendan Rodgers, Arsene Wenger, Roberto Martinez and Mauricio Pochettino have given us hope of another golden generation. These managers have received huge praise for the way that they have taken the Premier League to new levels of excitement, technical ability and professionalism. They are all progressive, technical students of the game who preach a positive brand possession, pace and passing football.

Andrew Maxwell, The Guardian

Both articles report on the same event, but use specific techniques in an attempt to achieve their purpose - to present their opinion of the team’s efforts and subsequent failure to win the Cup.

## Analysis

* Both articles give an immediate indication of their opinion from their initial headlines - The Guardian uses a rhetorical question ‘Who Should take the blame for England’s early World Cup exit?’ The Mirror’s headline ‘Five Things England need to do after disappointing exit in Brazil’ presents more [**imperative**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/guides/zpgc4wx/revision/3#glossary-zxx6tfr) language, eg ‘need’ to provide practical advice for the team that the reader would be then inclined to agree with.
* Both articles use language to convey their opinion – The Guardian uses sophisticated vocabulary, eg ‘tutelage’ and [**alliteration**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/guides/zpgc4wx/revision/3#glossary-zv247ty), eg ‘possession, pace and passing football’ to emphasise their support of the team’s performance. The Mirror uses a less formal standard of language to present a viewpoint, including the [**pun**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/guides/zpgc4wx/revision/3#glossary-zyvhb9q) ‘probably time to pull down the curtain’ and refers to Steven Gerrard as a ‘loyal England servant’ to encourage the reader to feel gratitude for the player’s efforts.
* Both articles assume that the reader is both knowledgeable of football and a supporter of the national team - they refer to several names within the profession to support and develop their viewpoint; The Guardian refers to a series of managerial level names ‘Brendan Rodgers, Arsene Wenger, Roberto Martinez and Mauricio Pochettino’ whilst the Mirror’s focus is more directed at the players ‘Frank Lampard, Phil Jagielka and Glen Johnson’.

Once you have considered how each article fulfils its purpose, you can decide to what extent you think the article is effective. Things to consider:

* What efforts has the writer made to persuade you to agree with their ideas, either with particular language choices, or the way that the piece of writing is structured?
* Is the purpose of the text clear enough for you to agree or disagree?
* Is there any way that you think the text could be improved to make it more effective?

# Comparing fiction with non-fiction

Fiction (made-up stories) and literary non-fiction (creative writing based on facts) often use many of the same techniques, and share the same topics, so it makes sense that they can be compared. They are usually compared when they’re about the same thing. For example, you might look at fictional and non-fictional accounts of:

* a journey in a particular place
* a family meal
* a day out

You might compare the **methods** the writers use to create effective texts, but you might also compare the **ideas** that they give of their topic. Do they show similar ideas despite one being fiction and the other non-fiction?

# Example

The two extracts below give descriptions of Christmas dinner. One is a fictional account by Charles Dickens, taken from a novel. The other is an introduction to a collection of recipes you might use to cook your own feast, by Nigella Lawson.

There never was such a goose. Bob said he didn't believe there ever was such a goose cooked. Its tenderness and flavour, size and cheapness, were the themes of universal admiration. Eked out by apple-sauce and mashed potatoes, it was a sufficient dinner for the whole family; indeed, as Mrs Cratchit said with great delight (surveying one small atom of a bone upon the dish), they hadn't ate it all at last. Yet every one had had enough, and the youngest Cratchits in particular, were steeped in sage and onion to the eyebrows. But now, the plates being changed by Miss Belinda, Mrs Cratchit left the room alone -- too nervous to bear witnesses -- to take the pudding up and bring it in.

A Christmas Carol, Charles Dickens

The old fave, my Spiced and Superjuicy Turkey is hard to resist – there's something about the brining method which makes the turkey easier to carve into elegantly thin slices, so not only will you feel better on the day but also the turkey will go further – and for me this has to go with Allspice Gravy, Gingerbread Stuffing and Redder Than Red Cranberry Sauce. But I do want to draw your attention, as well, to the Turkey Breast Stuffed with Italian Sausage and Marsala-Steeped Cranberries. This is particularly fab for a party, when you can cook it and slice it (easily) into generous slabs. I know that Perfect Roast Potatoes is an immodest title but, I promise you, they are a seasonal spud sensation. My mother always served her Brussels Sprouts with a lot of buttered chestnuts (and cooked and peeled her own). I have upped the ante by adding gorgeous salty pancetta cubes (feel free to substitute bacon) and been unapologetically lazier by buying vacuum-packed ready cooked and peeled chestnuts.

Christmas Recipes, Nigella Lawson’s blog

## Analysis

* Dickens is describing a fictional meal, whereas Lawson is describing her Christmas menu in an introduction to a collection of recipes.
* Both extracts focus on the food, and emphasise its deliciousness. In both, there is a central roast, and then accompanying potatoes and sauces.
* The extract from Lawson’s blog places more emphasis on a variety of recipes, and the richness of food, as you would expect from a recipe book.
* Both extracts suggest the themes of thrift – the Dickens passage uses the word ‘eked’ to suggest making food stretch, whereas Lawson talks about making the turkey ‘go further’. Christmas dinner might be about indulgence, but it’s also expensive.
* Lawson uses [**alliteration**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/guides/zpgc4wx/revision/4#glossary-zv247ty) to emphasise the food – ‘seasonal spud sensation’ – while Dickens uses the [**metaphor**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/guides/zpgc4wx/revision/4#glossary-zwxwtfr) of the children being ‘steeped in sage and onion to the eyebrows’ to emphasise how much they have eaten.
* In both texts there is an expectation that Christmas dinner means eating so much you feel sick – in A Christmas Carol this is shown through the characters, but Lawson has to show this through the number of recipes she mentions.

# Organising your ideas for a plan

# Using spider diagrams

Spider diagrams are useful for recording thoughts and ideas. When you are writing about one text, you may decide to use a spider diagram to jot down your ideas and then order them.

When writing about two texts you need to make links between the points you have identified about each of them. To do this, you could:

* make separate spider diagrams for each text, and then look to link points between them
* make one spider diagram showing each point you make about one text (for example ‘the author directly addresses the audience’), and checking to see if it’s true of the other text too

# Using tables

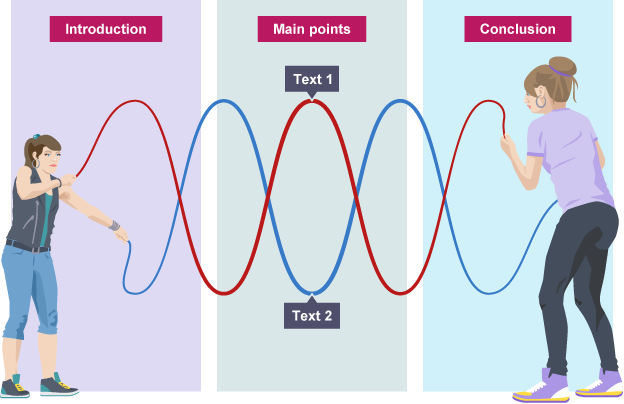
If you like having a neatly written plan, you might try using a table.

Here’s an example:

| **Point** | **Example from text A** | **Example from text B** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Use of humour | The pun in the title | Exaggeration about the mother character |
| Description for different purposes | Lots of detail in order to sell the product – we know how great it is | Lots of detail to build up a picture of the family, so we feel sorry for them at the end |

**When you have connections between the points, you need to pick the most important ones, and decide which order they will go in.**

# How to structure a comparison response



A comparison response still follows the basic essay structure:

* an introduction
* four or five main points supported by details
* a conclusion - this must link back to the question, and mention both texts

When you compare texts, it’s important to talk about **both texts** all the way through. **Don’t** write all about one text, then all about the other.

In each paragraph, make sure you mention both, even if a point is mostly about one of them.

# Sentence starters

Some key phrases can help you to compare texts.

| **Similarities** | **Differences** |
| --- | --- |
| Similarly… | In contrast… |
| Equally… | However… |
| In the same way | On the other hand… |
| Just as... so does.... | Alternatively… |
| Both... and... | In a different way… |

When comparing texts, you are making a point about two different texts, backing up ideas with evidence and explaining the idea. Then using a linking statement, you can connect the two ideas together.

# Example

Take a look at the structure of the following example, where the writer compares how their mother and father react to poor behaviour:

Both my Mum and Dad lose their temper sometimes when we misbehave, but in completely different ways.

My Mum usually reacts to everything by losing her temper really quickly and screaming in response to make sure everyone knows just how furious she is. The thing that causes her to react strictly is usually leaving lights on. The quotation, ‘If I have to tell you again to turn those lights off, I will take the bulb out of your bedroom!’ This shows that sometimes she can exaggerate in her reactions.

On the other hand, Dad will hardly ever lose his temper, or raise his voice. Instead, he will just stare at you silently, so you know instantly that you are in trouble. The quotation, ‘Well’ is the single word that he says once he has stared at you for a minute, and this shows that whilst he doesn’t scream and shout like Mum, he gives you a warning of the lecture that he is about to give you.

## Analysis

Notice how the writer makes a point about how each parent loses their temper, backs it up with evidence and then explains their idea. The linking sentence starting with ‘on the other hand’ shows how the two ideas are similar or different.