

COMPETENCY 1.0 CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION

Skill 1.1 Compare/contrast ideas or information presented in different sections of a reading selection or from different sources

To **compare** ideas or pieces of information presented in different sections of a reading selection or from different sources is to point out the similarities between or among such ideas or pieces of information. To **contrast** such ideas or pieces of information is to point out the differences between or among them.

Keeping track of how the different sections of a reading selection or how different sources present similar or differing ideas or pieces of information reinforces those ideas for the reader (comparing) or alerts readers that there is some degree of controversy operative in the discussion (contrasting). It might even reveal weaknesses, errors, or inconsistencies in the author's or authors' presentation(s). Both activities, comparing and contrasting, are active reading skills. This means that they require readers to engage with text beyond merely decoding the words in the immediate context. Both activities promote better understanding of the text(s) and longer retention of the information.

Using **graphic organizers** to track comparisons and contrasts can help readers gain a clearer understanding of the points that the author has (or authors have) in mind. Venn diagrams are graphic organizers particularly suited to track comparisons and contrasts. A Venn diagram has two circles, each circle representing ideas or information from a particular section of a reading selection or from a particular source, and these circles are drawn so that there is an overlap area common to both. Similarities (comparisons) between the ideas or information from the two sections or sources are recorded in the overlap area of the Venn diagram, and differences (contrasts) are recorded in the other areas of the two circles.

As an example of how to apply comparison and contrast skills, consider Edgar Allen Poe's short story, "The Tell-Tale Heart." In it, Poe employed first person narration to describe a bizarre murder and its after-effects on the narrator, the guilty party. At the beginning of the story, the narrator stated that his purpose in describing the events was to establish that he was not crazy because he could describe them impassively. As he nears the story's end, his descriptions become far from impassive.

By contrasting his promise to tell the story impassively with his later wild description of events, readers can gain the insight needed to conclude that, even by his own minimal standards, the narrator was truly crazy. Another useful application of these skills to the same story could be to compare how nearly every paragraph of the story included at least one revelation by the narrator that would tend to establish that he was crazy no matter how calmly he could tell the story. Both applications allow readers to gain insight into the story's real point.

Skill 1.2 Identify the reasons, examples, details, or facts in a reading selection that support the author's main idea

Supporting details are examples, facts, ideas, illustrations, cases, and anecdotes used by a writer to explain, expand on, and develop the more general main idea. A writer's choice of supporting materials is determined by the nature of the topic being covered. Supporting details are specifics that relate directly to the main idea. Writers select and shape material according to their purposes. An advertisement writer seeking to persuade readers to buy a particular running shoe, for instance, will emphasize only the positive characteristics of the shoe in advertisement copy. A columnist for a running magazine, on the other hand, might list the good and bad points about the same shoe in an article recommending appropriate shoes for different kind of runners. Both major details (those that directly support the main idea) and minor details (those that provide interesting, but not always essential, information) help create a well-written and fluid passage.

In the following paragraph, the sentences in **bold print** provide a skeleton of a paragraph on the benefits of recycling. The sentences in **bold** are generalizations that, by themselves, do not explain the need to recycle. The sentences in *italics* add details to show the general points in bold. Notice how the supporting details help you understand the necessity for recycling.

While one day recycling may become mandatory in all states, right now it is voluntary in many communities. *Those of us who participate in recycling are amazed by how much material is recycled.* **For many communities, the blue-box recycling program has had an immediate effect.** *By just recycling glass, aluminum cans, and plastic bottles, we have reduced the volume of disposable trash by one third, thus extending the useful life of local landfills by over a decade. Imagine the difference if those dramatic results were achieved nationwide.* **The amount of reusable items we thoughtlessly dispose of is staggering.** *For example, Americans dispose of enough steel every day to supply Detroit car manufacturers for three months. Additionally, we dispose of enough aluminum annually to rebuild the nation's air fleet. These statistics, available from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), should encourage all of us to watch what we throw away.* **Clearly, recycling in our homes and in our communities directly improves the environment.**

Notice how the author's supporting examples enhance the message of the paragraph and relate to the thesis noted above. If you only read the boldface sentences, you have a glimpse of the topic. This paragraph of illustration, however, is developed through numerous details creating specific images: *reduced the volume of disposable trash by one-third; extended the useful life of local landfills by over a decade; enough steel everyday to supply Detroit car manufacturers for three months; enough aluminum to rebuild the nation's air fleet.* If the writer had merely written a few general sentences, then you would not fully understand the vast amount of trash involved in recycling or the positive results of current recycling efforts.

Skill 1.3 Make predictions about the outcome of an event based on information from a reading selection

An **inference** is sometimes called an “educated guess” because it requires that you go beyond the strictly obvious to create additional meaning by taking the text one logical step further. Inferences and conclusions are based on the content of the passage – that is, on what the passage says or how the writer says it – and are derived by reasoning.

Inference is an essential and automatic component of most reading. For example, it is operative in determining the meaning of unknown words, the authors' main ideas, or whether or not authors have a bias. Such is the essence of inference: you use your own ability to reason in order to figure out what writers imply. As a reader, then, you must often logically extend your thinking in order to understand what authors only imply.

Consider the following example. Assume that you are an employer and that you are reading over the letters of reference submitted by a prospective employee for the position of clerk/typist in your real estate office. The position requires the applicant to be neat, careful, trustworthy, and punctual. You come across this letter of reference submitted by an applicant:

To whom it may concern,

Todd Finley has asked me to write a letter of reference for him. I am well qualified to do so because he worked for me for three months last year. His duties included answering the phone, greeting the public, and producing some simple memos and notices on the computer. Although Todd initially had few computer skills and little knowledge of telephone etiquette, he did acquire some during his stay with us. Todd's manner of speaking, both on the telephone and with the clients who came to my establishment, could be described as casual. He was particularly effective when communicating with peers. Please contact me by telephone if you wish to have further information about my experience.

Here the writer implies, rather than openly states, the main idea. This letter calls attention to itself because there's a problem with its tone. A truly positive letter would say something like "I have the distinct honor of recommending Todd Finley." Here, however, the letter simply verifies that Todd worked in the office. Second, the praise is obviously lukewarm. For example, the writer says that Todd "was particularly effective when communicating with peers." An educated guess translates that statement into a nice way of saying that Todd was not serious enough in his communications with clients.

In order to draw **inferences** and come to **conclusions**, a reader must use prior knowledge and apply it to the current situation. A conclusion is rarely, and an inference is never, stated. You must rely on your inferential skills to apprehend them.

Practice Questions: Read the following passages and select an answer.

1. Tim Sullivan had just turned 15. As a birthday present, his parents had given him a guitar and a certificate for 10 guitar lessons. He had always shown a love of music and a desire to learn an instrument. Tim began his lessons, and, before long, he was making up his own songs. At the music studio, Tim met Josh, who played the piano, and Roger, whose instrument was the saxophone. They all shared the same dream of starting a band, and each was praised by his teacher as having real talent.

From this passage one can infer that

- A. Tim, Roger & Josh are going to start their own band.
 - B. Tim is going to give up his guitar lessons.
 - C. Tim, Josh & Roger will no longer be friends.
 - D. Josh & Roger are going to start their own band.
2. The Smith family waited patiently around Carousel Number 7 for their luggage to arrive. They were exhausted after their 5-hour trip and were anxious to get to their hotel. After about an hour, they realized that they no longer recognized any of the other passengers' faces. Mrs. Smith asked the person who appeared to be in charge if they were at the right carousel. The man replied, "Yes, this is it, but we finished unloading that baggage almost half an hour ago."

From the man's response we can infer that:

- A. The Smiths were ready to go to their hotel.
- B. The Smiths' luggage was lost.
- C. The man had their luggage.
- D. They were at the wrong carousel.

Answers:

1. (A) is the correct choice. Given the facts that Tim wanted to be a musician and start his own band, after meeting others who shared the same dreams, Tim probably joined them in an attempt to make their dreams become reality.

2. Since the Smiths were still waiting for their luggage, we know that they were not yet ready to go to their hotel. From the man's response, we know that they were not at the wrong carousel and that he did not have their luggage. Therefore, though not directly stated, it appears that their luggage was lost. Choice (B) is the correct answer.

Skill 1.4 Recognize the attitude, opinion, or viewpoint expressed by the authors toward their topics

An essay is an extended discussion of a writer's point of view about a particular topic. This point of view may be supported by using such writing modes as example, argument and persuasion, analysis, or comparison/contrast. In any case, a good essay is clear, coherent, well-organized, and fully developed.

When authors set out to write a passage, they usually have a purpose for doing so. That purpose may be to simply give information that might be interesting or useful to readers; it may be to persuade readers of a point of view or to move them to act in a particular way; it may be to tell a story; or it may be to describe something in such a way that an experience becomes available to readers through one or more of the five senses. Following are the primary devices for expressing a particular purpose in a piece of writing:

Basic expository writing simply gives information not previously known about a topic or is used to explain or define one. Facts, examples, statistics, cause and effect, direct tone, objective rather than subjective delivery, and non-emotional information are presented in a formal manner.

- **Descriptive writing** centers on person, place, or object using concrete and sensory words to create a mood or impression and arranges details in a chronological or spatial sequence.
- **Narrative writing** is developed using an incident, an anecdote, or a related series of events. Chronology, the 5 W's, topic sentence, and conclusion are essential ingredients.
- **Persuasive writing** implies a writer's ability to select vocabulary and to arrange facts and opinions in such a way that readers are moved to accept some target position. Persuasive writing may incorporate exposition and narration in pursuit of the main persuasive goal.

- **Journalistic writing** is theoretically free of author bias. It is essential when relaying information about an event, person, or thing that the information be factual and objective. Provide students with an opportunity to examine newspapers and to create their own. Many newspapers have educational programs that offer free papers to schools.

The **tone** of a written passage refers to an author's attitude toward the subject matter. The tone (mood, feeling) is revealed through such stylistic elements as vocabulary choice and sentence structure. The tone of the written passage is much like a speaker's voice; instead of being spoken, however, it is the product of words on a page.

Often, writers have an emotional stake in the subject; and their purpose, either explicitly or implicitly, is to convey those feelings to the reader. In such cases, the writing is generally subjective: that is, it stems from opinions, judgments, values, ideas, and feelings. Both sentence structure (syntax) and word choice (diction) are instrumental tools in creating tone.

Tone may be thought of generally as positive, negative, or neutral. Below is a statement about snakes that demonstrates this.

Many species of snakes live in California. Some of those species, both poisonous and non-poisonous, share habitats with humans.

The voice of the writer in this statement is neutral. The sentences are declarative (not exclamations, fragments, or questions). The adjectives are few and nondescript—*many, some, poisonous* (balanced with *non-poisonous*). Nothing much in this brief paragraph would alert the reader to the feelings of the writer about snakes. The paragraph has a neutral, objective, detached, impartial tone.

If the writer's attitude toward snakes involves admiration or even affection, the tone would generally be positive:

California snakes are a tenacious bunch. When they find their habitats invaded by humans, they cling to their home territories as long as they can, as if vainly attempting to fight off the onslaught of the human hordes.

An additional message emerges in this paragraph: The writer quite clearly favors snakes over people. The writer uses positive adjectives like *tenacious* to describe the snakes. The writer also humanizes the reptiles, making them seem to be brave, beleaguered creatures. Obviously, the writer is more sympathetic to snakes than to people in this paragraph.

If the writer's attitude toward snakes involves active dislike and fear, then the tone would also reflect that attitude by being negative:

Countless species of snakes, some more dangerous than others, still lurk on the urban fringes of California's towns and cities. They will often invade domestic spaces, terrorizing people and their pets.

Here, obviously, the snakes are the villains. They *lurk*, they *invade*, and they *terrorize*. The tone of this paragraph might be said to be distressed about snakes. In the same manner, a writer can use language to portray characters as good or bad. A writer uses positive and negative adjectives, as seen above, to express what a character is like.

Skill 1.5 Determine whether facts or ideas are relevant to an argument in a reading selection

The main idea of a passage may contain a wide variety of supporting information, but it is important that each sentence be related to the main idea. When a sentence contains information that bears little or no connection to the main idea, it is said to be **irrelevant**. It is important to continually assess whether or not a sentence contributes to the overall task of supporting the main idea. When a sentence is deemed irrelevant, it is best to either omit it from the passage or to make it relevant by one of the following strategies:

1. Adding detail – Sometimes a sentence can seem out of place if it does not contain enough information to link it to the topic. Adding specific information can show how the sentence relates to the main idea.
2. Adding an example – This is especially important in passages in which information is being argued, compared, or contrasted. Examples can support the main idea and give the document overall credibility.
3. Using diction effectively – When selecting words, it is important to understand connotation, avoid ambiguity, and avoid too much repetition.
4. Adding transitions – Transitions are extremely helpful for making sentences relevant because they are specifically designed to connect one idea to another. They can also reduce choppiness.

The following passage has several irrelevant sentences that are highlighted in bold.

The New City Planning Committee is proposing a new capitol building to represent the multicultural face of New City. **The current mayor is a Democrat.** The new capitol building will be on 10th Street across from the grocery store and next to the Recreational Center. It will be within walking distance to the subway and bus depot because the designers want to emphasize the importance of public transportation. Aesthetically, the building will have a contemporary design featuring a brushed-steel exterior and large, floor-to-ceiling windows. **It is important for employees to have a connection with the outside world even when they are in their offices.** Inside the building, the walls will be moveable. This will not only facilitate a multitude of creative floor plans, but it will also create a focus on open communication and on smooth flow of information. **It sounds a bit gimmicky to me.** Finally, the capitol will feature a large outdoor courtyard full of lush greenery and serene fountains. **Work will now seem like Club Med to those who work at the New City capitol!**

Skill 1.6 Recognize statements that strengthen or weaken arguments in a reading selection

An argument is a generalization that is proven or supported with facts. If the facts are not accurate, the generalization remains unproven. Using inaccurate “facts” to support an argument creates a *fallacy* in the overall reasoning. Some factors to consider in judging whether the facts used to support an argument are accurate are as follows:

1. Are the facts current, or are they out of date? For example, if the proposition “birth defects in babies born to drug-using mothers are increasing,” then the data must include the latest that is available.
2. Another important factor to consider in judging the accuracy of a fact is its source. Where were the data obtained, and is that source reliable?
3. The calculations on which the facts are based may be unreliable. It’s a good idea to run one’s own calculations before using a piece of borrowed information.

Even facts that are true and have a sharp impact on the argument may not be relevant to the case at hand.

1. Health statistics from an entire state may have no relevance, or little relevance, to a particular county or zip code. Statistics from an entire country cannot be used to prove very much about a particular state or county.
2. An analogy can be useful in making a point, but the comparison must match up in all characteristics, or it will not be relevant. Analogy should be used very carefully. It is often as likely to destroy an argument as it is to strengthen it.

The importance or significance of a fact may not be sufficient to strengthen an argument. For example, of the millions of immigrants in the U.S., using a single family to support a solution to the immigration problem will not make much difference overall even though those single-example arguments are often used to support one approach or another. They may achieve a positive reaction, but they will not prove that one solution is better than another. If enough cases were cited from a variety of geographical locations, the information might be significant.

How much is enough? Generally speaking, three strong supporting facts are sufficient to establish the thesis of an argument. For example:

Conclusion: All green apples are sour.

- When I was a child, I bit into a green apple from my grandfather's orchard, and it was sour.
- I once bought green apples from a roadside vendor, and, when I bit into one, it was sour.
- My grocery store had a sale on green Granny Smith apples last week, and I bought several only to find that they were sour when I bit into one.

The fallacy in the above argument is that the sample was insufficient. A more exhaustive search would probably turn up some green apples that were not sour.

Sometimes, more than three arguments is too many. On the other hand, it's not unusual to hear public speakers, particularly politicians, who will cite a long litany of facts to support their positions.

A very good example of the effect of omitting facts in an argument is this résumé situation. An applicant is arguing that he or she should be chosen for a particular job. The application form asks for information about past employment, and unfavorable dismissals from jobs in the past may just be omitted. Employers are usually suspicious of periods of time when an applicant has not listed an employer.

A writer makes choices about which facts will be used and which will be discarded in developing an argument. Those choices may exclude anything that is not supportive of the point of view the writer is taking. It's always a good idea for readers to do some research in order to spot these omissions and to ask whether they have an impact on acceptance of the point of view presented in the argument. No judgment is either black or white. If the argument seems too neat or too compelling, there are probably facts that might be relevant that have not been included.

Skill 1.7 Recognize the various persuasive techniques used by an author in a reading selection

Persuasive writing features facts and opinions that are used to get readers to agree with something that the author believes. Persuasive writing may have as its purpose getting you to change your mind, take a position on an issue, perform an action, or judge an event. Of course, there are many different ways to accomplish these goals. Authors may be straightforward and objective, in which case they will marshal a number of facts in support of a position. Alternatively, authors may use emotional words and, in so doing, reveal their personal preferences, biases, or strongly held opinions. While news stories seek to inform, other commonly read material such as editorials, reviews, and letters generally contain an element of persuasion.

Sample Passage and Analysis

Recent scientific research indicates that individuals who wish to lead long, healthy lives should switch from a meat-based to a vegetarian diet. The medical basis for this switch is irrefutable. One clinical study, published in Cancer Research, found that meat-eaters are twice as likely to die from cancer as vegetarians. Moreover, changing to a low-fat, high-fiber vegetarian lifestyle incorporating healthy exercise and stress reduction techniques has been shown to reverse hardening of the arteries and to lower blood pressure in patients suffering from heart disease. Other medical benefits may include the prevention of diabetes, gallstones, and osteoporosis and reductions in the severity and frequency of asthma attacks.