

A Short Guide to Writing about Art

TENTH EDITION

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WRITING A COMPARISON

If you really want to see something, look at something else.

—Howard Nemerov

Everything is what it is and not another thing.

—Bishop Joseph Butler

COMPARING AS A WAY OF DISCOVERING

Analysis frequently involves comparing: Things are examined for their resemblances to and differences from other things. Strictly speaking, if one emphasizes the differences rather than the similarities, one is contrasting rather than comparing, but we need not preserve this distinction; we can call both processes *comparing*.

Although your instructor may ask you to write a comparison of two works of art, the *subject* of the essay is the *works*, or, more precisely, the subject is the thesis you are advancing; for example, that one work is later than the other or is more successful. Comparison is simply an effective analytical *technique* to show some of the qualities of the works. We usually can get a clearer idea of what *X* is when we compare it to *Y*—provided that *Y* is at least somewhat like *X*. Comparing, in short, is a way of discovering, a way of learning, and ultimately a way of helping your reader to see things your way.

In the words of Howard Nemerov, quoted at the top of this page, “If you really want to see something, look at something else.” But the “something else” can’t be any old thing. It has to be relevant. For example, in a course in architecture you may compare two subway stations (considering the efficiency of the pedestrian patterns, the amenities, and the aesthetic qualities), with the result that you may come to understand both of them more fully; but a comparison of a subway station with a dormitory, no matter how elegantly written, can hardly teach the reader or the writer anything. If you keep in mind the principle that a comparison should help you to learn, you will not (unless you are kidding around) make useless



Shaka nyorai, The Historical Buddha. Sakyamuni Buddha. Japanese, late Heian period, late 10th-early 11th century. Cherry with polychrome and gold; single woodblock construction, 83 cm (32 $\frac{1}{16}$ in.) (height of figure). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Denman Waldo Ross Collection, 09.72.

comparisons, such as “What do Winnie the Pooh and Alexander the Great have in common?” “Same middle name.”

Art historians almost always use comparisons when they discuss authenticity: A work of uncertain attribution is compared with undoubtedly genuine works on the assumption that an inauthentic work, when closely compared with genuine works, will somehow be markedly different, perhaps in brush technique, and thereby shown probably not to be genuine (here we get to the thesis) despite superficial similarities of, say, subject matter and medium. (This assumption can be challenged—a given artist may have produced a work with unique characteristics—but it is nevertheless widely held.)

Comparisons are also commonly used in dating a work, and thus in tracing the history of an artistic movement or the development of an artist’s career. The assumption here is that certain qualities in a work indicate the period, the school, perhaps the artist, and even the period within the artist’s career. Let’s assume, for instance, that there is no doubt about who painted a particular picture, and that the problem is the date of the work. By comparing this work with a picture that the artist is known to have done, say, in 1850, and with yet another that the artist is known to have done in 1870, one



Guanyin, Chinese, Song Dynasty, 12th century. Wood with traces of polychrome and gilt. Overall: 141 × 88 × 88 cm (55 ½ × 34 ¾ × 34 ¾ in.). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Hervey E. Wetzel, 20.590.

may be able to conjecture that the undated picture was done, say, midway between the dated works, or that it is close in time to one or the other.

The assumptions underlying the uses of comparison are that an expert can recognize not only the stylistic characteristics of an artist, but can also identify those that are permanent and can establish the chronology of those that are temporary. In practice these assumptions are usually based on yet another assumption: A given artist's early works are relatively immature; the artist then matures, and if there are some dated works, we can with some precision trace this development or evolution. Whatever the merits of these assumptions, comparison is a tool by which students of art often seek to establish authenticity and chronology. Again, the comparison is not made for the sake of writing a comparison; rather, it is made for the sake of making a point.

TWO WAYS OF ORGANIZING A COMPARISON

We can call the two ways of organizing a comparison *block-by-block* (or, less elegantly but perhaps more memorably, *lumping*) and *point-by-point* (or *splitting*). When you compare block-by-block, you say what you have to say about one artwork in a block or lump, and then you go on to discuss the second artwork, in another block or lump. When you compare point-by-point, however, you split up your discussion of each work, more or less interweaving your comments on the two things being compared, perhaps in alternating paragraphs, or even in alternating sentences.

Here is a miniature essay—it consists of only one paragraph—that illustrates lumping. The writer compares a Japanese statue of a Buddha (page 136) with a Chinese statue of a bodhisattva (page 137). (A Buddha has achieved enlightenment and has withdrawn from the world. A bodhisattva—in Sanskrit the term means “enlightened being”—is, like a Buddha, a person of very great spiritual enlightenment, but unlike a Buddha, a bodhisattva chooses to remain in this world in order to save humankind.) The writer’s point here is simply to inform the museum-goer that all early East Asian religious images are not images of the Buddha. The writer says what she has to say about the Buddha, all in one lump, and then in another lump says what she has to say about the bodhisattva.

The Buddha, recognizable by a cranial bump that indicates a sort of supermind, sits erect and austere in the lotus position (legs crossed, each foot with the sole upward on the opposing thigh), in full control of his body. The carved folds of his garments, in keeping with the erect posture, are severe, forming a highly disciplined pattern that is an outward expression of his remote, constrained, austere inner nature. The bodhisattva, on the other hand, sits in a languid, sensuous posture known as “royal ease,” the head pensively tilted downward, one knee elevated, one leg hanging down. He is accessible, relaxed, and compassionate.

The structure is, simply, this:

The Buddha (posture, folds of garments, inner nature)

The bodhisattva (posture, folds of garments, inner nature)

If, however, the writer had wished to split rather than to lump, she would have compared an aspect of the Buddha with an aspect of the bodhisattva, then another aspect of the Buddha with another aspect of the bodhisattva, and so on, perhaps ending with a synthesis to clarify the point of the comparison. The paragraph might have read like this:

The Buddha, recognizable by a cranial bump that indicates a sort of supermind, sits erect and austere, in the lotus position (legs

crossed, each foot with the sole upward on the opposing thigh), in full control of his body. In contrast, the bodhisattva sits in a languid, sensuous posture known as "royal ease," the head pensively tilted downward, one knee elevated, one leg hanging down. The carved folds of the Buddha's garments, in keeping with his erect posture, are severe, forming a highly disciplined pattern, whereas the bodhisattva's garments hang naturalistically. Both figures are spiritual, but the Buddha is remote, constrained, and austere; the bodhisattva is accessible, relaxed, and compassionate.

In effect the structure is this:

The Buddha (posture)

The bodhisattva (posture)

The Buddha (garments)

The bodhisattva (garments)

The Buddha and the bodhisattva (synthesis)

When you offer an extended comparison, it is advisable to begin by indicating your focus, that is, by defining the main issue or problem—for instance, the kind of ivory, the subject matter, the treatment of space, and the style of the carving suggest that this piece is fourteenth-century French and that piece is a modern fake—and also by indicating what your principle of organization will be.

Caution: Splitting is well suited to short essays, say from one to three paragraphs, or for occasional use within longer essays, but if it is relentlessly used as the organizing principle of a longer essay, it is likely to produce a ping-pong effect. The essay may not come into focus—the reader may not grasp the point—until the writer stands back from the seven-layer cake and announces, in the concluding paragraph, that the odd layers taste better. In your preparatory thinking, splitting probably will help you to get certain characteristics clear in your mind, but you must come to some conclusions about what these add up to before writing the final version. The final version should not duplicate the preliminary thought processes; rather, since the point of a comparison is to make a point, it should be organized so as to make the point clearly and effectively.

Lumping, especially if the essay is no longer than two or three paragraphs, will often do the trick. After reflection you may decide that although there are superficial similarities between X and Y, there are essential differences; in the finished essay, then, you probably will not wish to obscure the main point by jumping back and forth from one work to the other, working through a series of similarities and differences. It may be better to announce your thesis, then discuss X, and then Y.

Whether in any given piece of writing you should compare by lumping or by splitting will depend largely on your purpose and on the complexity of the material. Lumping is usually preferable for long, complex comparisons, if for no other reason than to avoid the ping-pong effect, but no hard-and-fast rule covers all cases here. Some advice, however, may be useful:

If you split, in rereading your draft:

- *Ask yourself if your imagined reader can keep up with the back-and-forth movement.* Make sure (perhaps by a summary sentence at the end) that the larger picture is not obscured by the zigzagging.
- *Don't leave any loose ends.* Make sure that if you call attention to points 1, 2, and 3 in X, you mention all of them (not just 1 and 2) in Y.

If you lump, do not simply comment first on X and then on Y.

- *Let your reader know where you are going*, probably by means of an introductory sentence.
- *Don't be afraid in the second half to remind the reader of the first half.* It is legitimate, even desirable, to connect the second half of the comparison (chiefly concerned with Y) to the first half (chiefly concerned with X). Thus, you will probably say things like "Unlike X, Y show. . . ." or "Although Y superficially resembles X in such-and-such, when looked at closely Y shows. . . ." In short, a comparison organized by lumping will not break into two separate halves if the second half develops by reminding the reader how it differs from the first half.

A RULE FOR WRITERS:

When you write a comparison you are not merely making two lists. Rather, you are making a point, arguing a thesis. Indeed, you may want to introduce the comparison with a thesis sentence.

Again, the point of a comparison is to call attention to the unique features of something by holding it up against something similar but significantly different. If the differences are great and apparent, a comparison is a waste of effort. (Blueberries are different from elephants. Blueberries do not have trunks. And elephants do not grow on bushes.) Indeed, a comparison between essentially and obviously unlike things will merely confuse, for by making the comparison, the writer implies that there are significant similarities, and readers can only wonder why they do not see them. The essays that do break into unrelated halves are essays that have no focus and that make uninformative comparisons: The first half tells the reader about five

qualities in El Greco; the second half tells the reader about five different qualities in Rembrandt. You will notice in the following student essay that the second half occasionally looks back to the first half.

SAMPLE ESSAY: A STUDENT'S COMPARISON

This essay, by an undergraduate, discusses one object and then discusses a second. It lumps rather than splits. It does not break into two separate parts because at the start it looks forward to the second object, and in the second half of the essay it occasionally reminds us of the first object.

When you read this essay, don't let its excellence lead you into thinking that you can't do as well. The essay, keep in mind, is the product of much writing and rewriting. As Rebecca Bedell wrote, her ideas got better and better, for in her drafts she sometimes put down a point and then realized that it needed strengthening (e.g., with concrete details) or that—come to think of it—the point was wrong and ought to be deleted. She also derived some minor assistance—for facts, not for her fundamental thinking—from books, which she cites in footnotes.

Brief marginal annotations have been added to the following essay in order to help you appreciate the writer's skill in presenting her ideas.*

Rebecca Bedell

FA 232 American Art

Title is focused and, in "Development," implies the thesis

John Singleton Copley's Early Development:
From Mrs. Joseph Mann to Mrs. Ezekial Goldthwait

Opening paragraph is unusually personal but engaging, and it implies the problem the writer will address

Several Sundays ago while I was wandering through the American painting section of the Museum of Fine Arts, a professorial bellow shook me. Around the corner strode a well-dressed mustachioed member of the art historical elite, a gaggle of note-taking students following in his wake. "And here," he said, "we have John Singleton Copley." He marshaled his group about the rotunda, explaining that, "as one can easily see from these paintings, Copley never really learned to paint until he went to England."

*Rebecca Bedell, *Mrs. Mann and Mrs. Goldthwait*. Copyright 1981 by Rebecca Bedell. Used by permission of the author.

*Thesis is clearly
announced*

A walk around the rotunda together with a quick leafing through a catalog of Copley's work should convince any viewer that Copley reached his artistic maturity years before he left for England in 1774. A comparison of two paintings at the Museum of Fine Arts, *Mrs. Joseph Mann* of 1753 (Figure 1) and *Mrs. Ezekial Goldthwait* of ca. 1771 (Figure 2), reveals that Copley had made huge advances in his style and technique even before he left America; by the time of his departure he was already a great portraitist. Both paintings are half-length portraits of seated women, and both are accompanied by paired portraits of their husbands.

*Brief description
of the first work*

The portrait of Mrs. Joseph Mann, the twenty-two-year-old wife of a tavern keeper in Wrentham, Massachusetts,¹ is signed and dated "J. S. Copley 1753." One of Copley's earliest known works, painted when he was only fifteen years old, it depicts a robust young woman staring candidly at the viewer. Seated outdoors in front of a rock outcropping, she rests her left elbow on a classical pedestal and she dangles a string of pearls from her left hand.

*Relation of the
painting to its
source*

The painting suffers from being tied too closely to its mezzotint prototype. The composition is an almost exact mirror image of that used in Isaac Beckett's mezzotint after William Wissing's *Princess Anne* of ca. 1683.² Pose, props, and background are all lifted directly from the

¹Jules David Prown, *John Singleton Copley* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), I: 110.

²Charles Coleman Sellers, "Mezzotint Prototypes of Colonial Portraiture: A Survey Based on the Research of Waldon Phoenix Belknap, Jr.," *Art Quarterly* 20 (1957): 407-68. See especially plate 16.



Figure 1. John Singleton Copley, American, 1738–1815. *Mrs. Joseph Mann (Bethia Torrey)*, 1753. Oil on canvas, 91.44 × 71.75 cm. (36 × 28 ¼ in.). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Frederick H. Metcalf and Holbrook E. Metcalf, 43.1353.



Figure 2. John Singleton Copley, American, 1738–1815. *Mrs. Ezekiel Goldthwait (Elizabeth Lewis)*, 1771. Oil on canvas, 127.32 × 101.92 cm (50 1/8 × 40 1/8 in.). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Bequest of John T. Bowen in memory of Eliza M. Bowen, 41.84.

print. Certain changes, however, were necessary to acclimatize the image to its new American setting. Princess Anne is shown provocatively posed in a landscape setting. Her blouse slips from her shoulders to reveal an enticing amount of bare bosom. Her hair curls lasciviously over her shoulders and a pearl necklace slides suggestively through her fingers as though, having removed the pearls, she will proceed further to disrobe. But Copley reduces the sensual overtones. Mrs. Mann's bodice is decorously raised to ensure sufficient coverage, and the alluring gaze of the princess is replaced by a cool stare. However, the suggestive pearls remain intact, producing an oddly discordant note.

First sentence of paragraph is both a transition and a topic sentence: the weakness of the painting

The picture has other problems as well. The young Copley obviously had not yet learned to handle his medium. The brush strokes are long and streaky. The shadows around the nose are a repellent greenish purple, and the highlight on the bridge was placed too far to one side. The highlights in the hair were applied while the underlying brown layer was still wet so that instead of gleaming curls he produced dull gray smudges. In addition, textural differentiation is noticeably lacking. The texture of the rock is the same as the skin, which is the same as the satin and the grass and the pearls. The anatomy is laughable. There is no sense of underlying structure. The arms and neck are the inflated tubes so typical of provincial portraiture. The left earlobe is missing, and the little finger on the left hand is disturbingly disjointed. Light too appears to have given Copley trouble. It seems, in general, to fall from the upper left, but the shadows are not consistently applied. And the light-dark contrasts are

Concrete details support the paragraph's opening assertion

rather too sharp, probably due to an overreliance on the mezzotint source.

Transition
("Despite its
faults") and
statement of idea
that unifies the
paragraph

Despite its faults, however, the painting still represents a remarkable achievement for a boy of fifteen. In the crisp linearity of the design, the sense of weight and bulk of the figure, the hint of a psychological presence, and especially in the rich vibrant color, Copley has already rivaled and even surpassed the colonial painters of the previous generation.

Transition
("about seven-
teen years later")
and reassertion
of central thesis

In *Mrs. Ezekial Goldthwait*, about seventeen years later and about four years before Copley went to England, all the early ineptness had disappeared. Copley has arrived at a style that is both uniquely his own and uniquely American; and in this style he achieves a level of quality comparable to any of his English contemporaries.

Brief description
of the second
picture

The substantial form of Mrs. Goldthwait dominates the canvas. She is seated at a round tilt-top table, one hand extended over a tempting plate of apples, oranges, and pears. A huge column rises in the right-hand corner to fill the void.

Biography and
(in rest of para-
graph) its rele-
vance to the work

The fifty-seven-year-old Mrs. Goldthwait, wife of a wealthy Boston merchant, was the mother of fourteen children; she was also a gardener noted for her elaborate plantings.³ Copley uses this fertility theme as a unifying element in his composition. All the forms are plump and heavy, like Mrs. Goldthwait herself. The ripe, succulent fruit, the heavy, rotund mass of the column, the round top of the table—all are suggestive of the fecundity of the sitter.

³Prown, 76.

The most obvious characteristic of the work

The painting is also marked by a painstaking realism. Each detail has been carefully and accurately rendered, from the wart on her forehead to the wood grain of the tabletop to the lustrous gleam of the pearl necklace. As a painter of fabrics Copley surpasses all his contemporaries. The sheen of the satin, the rough, crinkly surface of the black lace, the smooth, translucent material of the cuffs—all are exquisitely rendered.

"But" is transitional, taking us from the obvious (clothing) to the less obvious (character)

But the figure is more than a mannequin modeling a delicious dress. She has weight and bulk, which make her physical presence undeniable. Her face radiates intelligence, and her open, friendly personality is suggested by the slight smile at the corner of her lips and by her warm, candid gaze.

Brief reminder of the first work, to clarify our understanding of the second work

The rubbery limbs of Copley's early period have been replaced by a more carefully studied anatomy (not completely convincing, but still a remarkable achievement given that he was unable to dissect or to draw from nude models). There is some sense for the underlying armature of bone and muscle, especially in the forehead and hands. And in her right hand it is even possible to see the veins running under her skin.

Further comparison, again with emphasis on the second work

Light is also treated with far greater sophistication. The chiaroscuro is so strong and rich that it calls to mind Caravaggio's *tenebroso*. The light falls almost like a spotlight onto the face of Mrs. Goldthwait, drawing her forward from the deep shadows of the background, thereby enhancing the sense of a psychological presence.

Reassertion of the thesis, supported by concrete details

Copley's early promise as a colorist is fulfilled in mature works such as *Mrs. Goldthwait*. The rich, warm red-brown tones of the satin, the wood, and the column

dominate the composition. But the painting is enlivened by a splash of color on either side—on the left by Copley's favorite aqua in the brocade of the chair, and on the right by the red and green punctuation marks of the fruit. The bright white of the cap, set off against the black background, draws attention to the face, while the white of the sleeves performs the same function for the hands.

*Summary, but
not mere rehash;
new details*

Color, light, form, and line all work together to produce a pleasing composition. It is pleasing, above all, for the qualities that distinguish it from contemporary English works: for its insistence on fidelity to fact, for its forthright realism, for the lovingly delineated textures, for the crisp clarity of every line, for Mrs. Goldthwait's charming wart and her friendly double chin, for the very materialism that marks this painting as emerging from our pragmatic mercantile society. In these attributes lie the greatness of the American Copleys.

*Further summary, again
heightening the
thesis*

Not that I want to say that Copley never produced a decent painting once he arrived in England. He did. But what distinguishes the best of his English works (see, for example *Mrs. John Montessor* and *Mrs. Daniel Denison Rogers*)⁴ is not the facile, flowery brushwork or the fluttery drapery (which he picked up from current English practice) but the very qualities that also mark the best of his American works—the realism, the sense of personality, the almost touchable textures of the fabrics, and the direct way in which the sitter's gaze engages the viewer. Copley was a fine, competent painter in England, but it was not the trip to England that made him great.

⁴Prown, plates.

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Works Cited

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Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966.

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✓ **Checklist for Writing a Comparison**

Have I asked myself the following questions?

- ☐ Is the point of the comparison clear? (Examples: to show that although X and Y superficially resemble each other, they are significantly different; or, to show that X is better than Y; or, to illuminate X by briefly comparing it to Y.) Phrases like "Despite these differences" and "A less conspicuous but still significant resemblance" are signs that critical thinking is at work, that a point is being made.
- ☐ Are all significant similarities and differences covered?
- ☐ Is the organization clear? If the chief organizational device is lumping, does the second half of the essay connect closely enough with the first so that the essay does not divide into two essays? If the chief organizational device is splitting, does the essay avoid the Ping-Pong effect? Given the topic and the thesis, is it the best organization?
- ☐ If a value judgment is offered, is it supported by evidence?