

Comparative Analysis Essay

Due: Friday, December 11 in Discussion (and uploaded to your CTools DropBox folder)

Minimum length: 6 pages.

ASSIGNMENT:

Write a comparative analysis essay involving at least two of the longer texts we've covered in this course: *The Corrections*, *Swamplandia!*, *The Fever*, *Station Eleven*, *Super Sad True Love Story*, or *Zone One*.

INTRODUCTION:

First and foremost, a Comparative Analysis is NOT a Compare/Contrast essay. It is much more sophisticated than simply identifying what is similar and what is different in texts. Rather, in a comparative analysis you're examining two (or more) texts ***to analyze what can be gained from making connections between them that wouldn't be possible if you examined them separately.*** [Note: I've bolded, italicized, and underlined this phrase, indicating that it is likely important.]

For an essay like this to succeed, you will need to first notice particular preoccupations that exist in more than one text, and then extrapolate a **driving question** to begin your inquiry. For example:

- Let's say you noticed that Megan Abbott and Gary Shteyngart both spend a lot of time in their texts describing the female body, particularly in terms of sexuality and the sexualizing of the female form. You might ask: How do these different **representations** of the female body illuminate something related to [insert: your topic] or subvert/complicate how we think about [insert: a different subject/idea]?"

Once you have a subject and a question to direct your investigation, head into the texts to start your inquiry. It will likely be more productive to use a driving question to explore/interrogate your topic than to come up with a thesis/claim and go hunting for evidence to "back it up." At least at first. Yes, eventually, this will need to become an argument, one that *does* make claims, one that *does* utilize evidence to support that claim. You might even have a hunch about what your claim will become. But for your first draft, really approach this process in an exploratory way, so as not to limit your intellectual engagement.

In particular, think of this essay as an opportunity to spend some time meditating on an issue that you're curious about. What do you want to learn? Figure out? Not that you're "solving" anything here, per se. Rather, a productive essay **troubles the material with critical thinking** for the purpose of **arriving at a deeper (i.e., more complex) understanding of the subject** and these texts.

Remember: these novels are not just telling good stories, they're also producing and interpreting culture. The way in which these texts grapple with or represent issues related to gender, sexuality, race, time, power, femininity & masculinity, immigration, belonging, the city, suburbia, art, youth, performance, technology, nature, morality, mortality, communication, being "healthy" vs. "sick"—and so on, and so forth—all reveal something about what it means to be human, what it means to be "American," what it means to be alive in the 21st century.

Further, you might consider the way in which some of these texts create complex preoccupations by putting things into dialogue with one another. How technology affects sexuality, say. Or, communication. How performance relates to gender, perhaps. Or, the intersection of gender and power or belonging or...

GETTING STARTED:

As you begin generating ideas, first look back over your notes and the texts themselves in order to identify preoccupations, passages, and elements from the readings that you found interesting, memorable, or perplexing. Then, start to see if there are patterns, if these moments/preoccupations raise questions, or if they gesture toward some larger phenomenon or representation. That's where you want to start your inquiry.

You might also pay particular attention to choices the authors have made in constructing their texts, and what effects these decisions have produced—not just stylistically, but how certain preoccupations or themes of the text help us make meaning from the style/construction of the text and vice-versa.

GUIDELINES FOR FINAL DRAFT:

- **Have a specific and complex thesis**
Remember: A thesis is *debatable* and it needs *evidence* to support it.
- **Use quotes to support your analysis**
Remember: You must contextualize *why* you think the quote is important enough to be included. You're introducing a quote as a way to *support* your point, not make it for you.
- **Don't take your audience for granted**
Remember: The audience may not have read the text. As such, you may have to summarize enough to contextualize the point you're making. But don't *over* summarize—this is not a report.
- **Structure your essay so that your argument BUILDS**
Remember: You want your essay to *develop* and *grow*. As such, closely examine each quote, example, and paraphrase to be sure they are moving the analysis forward—that they're introducing *new* material to the essay. The worst thing that can happen to your paper is that it turns into a list: “and here's another example, and another, and another...”
- **Include strong transitions between your ideas**
Remember: Transitions are necessary at both the paragraph and sentence level. They show us how one detail or example led you to the next **stage** of thinking. This = development.
- **Vary your sentence structure**
Remember: Sentences that all sound the same cause the reader to tune out. They also make the development of ideas more difficult because you aren't transitioning *between* sentences.
- **Make sure your essay answers the “So What?” question**
Remember: Your essay needs to have a point. Simply identifying trends or patterns that you've “noticed” in the text isn't enough. In addition to supporting your claim with solid evidence, your paper must also explain to us why the thesis *matters*. We call this “synthesis.” An essay synthesizes everything that's been developed in your analysis and goes *beyond* the argument to a new level of meaning. (Note: this typically takes place in—or leads directly up to—the conclusion.) In short: the sum must be greater than the parts! When the reader gets to the end of your essay, regardless of how intelligent and interesting your ideas were, they will still ask themselves this fundamental question: “So What?”
- **Don't try to do too much.**
Remember: You can't talk about everything. Less is usually more. Avoid creating a list of the work's elements without showing how they are relevant to the overall thesis.
- **Have a title that adds meaning to the essay.**
'Nuff said.