

2. The end of the essay focuses specifically on the power of African-American poets to sustain their race through adversity. Others have written of a similar power of art and literature to elevate and empower the whole human race. Consider that universal theme. In what ways do works of art and literature help increase our nobility? Explore this theme in an essay that includes examples of your own favorite writers, poets, musicians, or other artists.

COMPARISON AND CONTRAST

One of the easiest ways for us to understand a thing is to consider it alongside something else, emphasizing either similarities, differences, or both. We are always making comparisons: of products, in order to determine which is the best buy; of restaurants, in order to determine which is most appropriate for a given occasion; of candidates for office, in order to determine which will best serve our interests. What these three examples illustrate is that we use comparison and contrast not for its own sake but to support a point. Thus, if you use this strategy in your writing, you should always keep the *point* of your comparison in mind.

Usually, the two subjects under comparison will have something in common; that common feature will constitute the basis for comparison. When you were deciding on a college, for example, you may have considered a large public university, a small private college, or a community college. These kinds of schools are quite different, but they all share at least one common basis for comparison: they are all institutions of higher education. When making comparisons, it is important to maintain the *same basis* for each subject being compared. For example, if you scrutinize the liberal arts *curriculum* of the first two schools, but then focus on the *location* of the third school, you have undermined your comparison by changing the basis. By focusing on the same qualities of each subject, you maintain that basis.

In "Graduation," Angelou uses comparison and contrast briefly when she refers to Mr. Donleavy's speech praising the accomplishments of both white and African American children in the school district. In response to his words, she thinks, "The white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gaugins, and our boys (the girls weren't even in on it) would try to be Jesse Owens and Joe Louises." In this case, the basis for comparison is the field in which children might hope to succeed.

Later in the essay, Angelou contrasts her appreciation of "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," known as "the Negro National Anthem," to her response to Patrick Henry's "Give me liberty or give me death" speech:

Each child I know had learned ["Lift Ev'ry Voice"] with his ABC's and along with "Jesus Loves Me This I Know." But I personally had never heard it before. Never heard the words, despite the thousand of times I had sung them. Never thought they had anything to do with me. On the other hand, the words of Patrick Henry had made such an impression on me that I had been able to stretch myself tall and trembling and say, "I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death."

Angelou's basis for comparison in this example is the child's misunderstanding of the relevance of famous words.

The Angelou examples represent *comparison* and *contrast* used in support of other rhetorical strategies (e.g., *narrative* and *persuasion*). At times, however, an entire essay can be written using the comparison-and-contrast strategy. In such essays, appropriate organization is essential. Most writers recognize two primary methods of organization for comparison and contrast: point-by-point or subject-by-subject. Consider the educational institutions mentioned earlier, for example: if you were to write an essay on the topic, you might organize your comparison by looking at curriculum, cost, and location of the institutions. For each of these categories, you would consider each school in turn. This is a point-by-point organization. But you might also choose to consider the individual school, focusing on curriculum, cost, and location of each before moving on to a discussion of the next school. This organization is subject-by-subject. In outline form, the two organizations would look like this:

Point-by-Point	Subject-by-Subject
Curriculum	Large Public University curriculum
large public university	cost
small private college	location
community college	
Cost	Small Private College curriculum
large public university	cost
small private college	location
community college	
Location	Community College curriculum
large public university	cost
small private college	location
community college	

Occasionally, a writer will combine the two organizing strategies. Regardless of the strategy you choose, establishing a *pattern* for the comparison will make the essay clearer and easier for the reader to understand.

Whether a comparison is used in support of another rhetorical strategy or presented as the primary strategy in an essay, the same guidelines apply: the comparison must have a *point*, it must operate on a common *basis*, and (in the case of an essay) it must be *organized* appropriately.

GRANT AND LEE: A STUDY IN CONTRASTS

Bruce Catton

Bruce Catton (1899–1978) is best known for his popular histories of the American Civil War. He wrote a dozen books and many articles about the War, including A Stillness at Appomattox, which won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award in 1954. Having first worked as a newspaper journalist, Catton was interested in writing for the popular press rather than scholarly historians, and his writing always sought to make history real and living. "Grant and Lee: A Study in Contrasts" was published in 1956 in a book of essays by various historians called The American Story. As you read it, notice how Catton takes us far beyond just the story of these two Civil War generals meeting at the end of the War—he is indeed writing a chapter in an American story. As you read this focused exploration of the character of these two men and the times they embody, you will also be learning something about the Civil War itself and the nature of great men.

When Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee met in the parlor of a modest house at Appomattox Court House, Virginia, on April 9, 1865, to work out the terms for the surrender of Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, a great chapter in American life came to a close, and a great new chapter began.

These men were bringing the Civil War to its virtual finish. To be sure, other armies had yet to surrender, and for a few days the fugitive Confederate government would struggle desperately and vainly, trying to find some way to go on living now that its chief support was gone.

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But in effect it was all over when Grant and Lee signed the papers. And the little room where they wrote out the terms was the scene of one of the poignant, dramatic contrasts in American history.

They were two strong men, these oddly different generals, and they represented the strengths of two conflicting currents that, through them, had come into final collision.

Back of Robert E. Lee was the notion that the old aristocratic concept might somehow survive and be dominant in American life.

Lee was Tidewater Virginia, and in his background were family, culture, and tradition . . . the age of chivalry transplanted to a New World which was making its own legends and its own myths. He embodied a way of life that had come down through the age of knight-hood and the English country squire. America was a land that was beginning all over again, dedicated to nothing much more complicated than the rather hazy belief that all men had equal rights and should have an equal chance in the world. In such a land Lee stood for the feeling that it was somehow of advantage to human society to have a pronounced inequality in the social structure. There should be a leisure class, backed by ownership of land; in turn, society itself should be keyed to the land as the chief source of wealth and influence. It would bring forth (according to this ideal) a class of men with a strong sense of obligation to the community; men who lived not to gain advantage for themselves, but to meet the solemn obligations which had been laid on them by the very fact that they were privileged. From them the country would get its leadership; to them it could look for the higher values—of thought, of conduct, of personal deportment—to give it strength and virtue.

Lee embodied the noblest elements of this aristocratic ideal. Through him, the landed nobility justified itself. For four years, the Southern states had fought a desperate war to uphold the ideals for which Lee stood. In the end, it almost seemed as if the Confederacy fought for Lee; as if he himself was the Confederacy . . . the best thing that the way of life for which the Confederacy stood could ever have to offer. He had passed into legend before Appomattox. Thousands of tired, underfed, poorly clothed Confederate soldiers, long since past the simple enthusiasm of the early days of the struggle, somehow considered Lee the symbol of everything for which they had been willing to die. But they could not quite put this feeling into words. If the Lost Cause, sanctified by so much heroism and so many deaths, had a living justification, its justification was General Lee.

Grant, the son of a tanner on the Western frontier, was everything Lee was not. He had come up the hard way and embodied nothing in particular except the eternal toughness and sinewy fiber of the men who grew up beyond the mountains. He was one of a body of men who owed reverence and obeisance to no one, who were self-reliant to a fault, who cared hardly anything for the past but who had a sharp eye for the future.

These frontier men were the precise opposites of the tidewater aristocrats. Back of them, in the great surge that had taken people over the Alleghenies and into the opening Western country, there was a deep, implicit dissatisfaction with a past that had settled into grooves. They stood for democracy, not from any reasoned conclusion about the proper ordering of human society, but simply because they had grown up in the middle of democracy and knew how it worked. Their society might have privileges, but they would be privileges each man had won for himself. Forms and patterns meant nothing. No man was born to anything, except perhaps to a chance to show how far he could rise. Life was competition. Yet along with this feeling had come a deep sense of belonging to a national community. The Westerner who developed a farm, opened a shop, or set up in business as a trader could hope to prosper only as his own community prospered—and his community ran from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from Canada down to Mexico. If the land was settled, with towns and highways and accessible markets, he could better himself. He saw his fate in terms of the nation's own destiny. As its horizons expanded, so did his. He had, in other words, an acute dollars-and-cents stake in the continued growth and development of his country.

And that, perhaps, is where the contrast between Grant and Lee becomes most striking. The Virginia aristocrat, inevitably, saw himself in relation to his own region. He lived in a static society which could endure almost anything except change. Instinctively, his first loyalty would go to the locality in which that society existed. He would fight to the limit of endurance to defend it, because in defending it he was defending everything that gave his own life its deepest meaning.

The Westerner, on the other hand, would fight with an equal tenacity for the broader concept of society. He fought so because everything he lived by was tied to growth, expansion, and a constantly widening horizon. What he lived by would survive or fall with the nation itself. He could not possibly stand by unmoved in the face of an attempt to destroy the Union. He would combat it with everything he

had, because he could only see it as an effort to cut the ground out from under his feet.

So Grant and Lee were in complete contrast, representing two diametrically opposed elements in American life. Grant was the modern man emerging; beyond him, ready to come on the stage, was the great age of steel and machinery, of crowded cities and a restless burgeoning vitality. Lee might have ridden down from the old age of chivalry, lance in hand, silken banner fluttering over his head. Each man was the perfect champion of his cause, drawing both his strengths and his weaknesses from the people he led.

Yet it was not all contrast, after all. Different as they were—in background, in personality, in underlying aspiration—these two great soldiers had much in common. Under everything else, they were marvelous fighters. Furthermore, their fighting qualities were really very much alike.

Each man had, to begin with, the great virtue of utter tenacity and fidelity. Grant fought his way down the Mississippi Valley in spite of acute personal discouragement and profound military handicaps. Lee hung on in the trenches at Petersburg after hope itself had died. In each man there was an indomitable quality . . . the born fighter's refusal to give up as long as he can still remain on his feet and lift his two fists.

Daring and resourcefulness they had, too; the ability to think faster and move faster than the enemy. These were the qualities which gave Lee the dazzling campaigns of Second Manassas and Chancellorsville and won Vicksburg for Grant.

Lastly, and perhaps greatest of all, there was the ability, at the end, to turn quickly from war to peace once the fighting was over. Out of the way these two men behaved at Appomattox came the possibility of a peace of reconciliation. It was a possibility not wholly realized, in the years to come, but which did, in the end, help the two sections to become one nation again . . . after a war whose bitterness might have seemed to make such a reunion wholly impossible. No part of either man's life became him more than the part he played in this brief meeting in the McLean house at Appomattox. Their behavior there put all succeeding generations of Americans in their debt. Two great Americans, Grant and Lee—very different, yet under everything very much alike. Their encounter at Appomattox was one of the great moments of American history.

Questions on Meaning

1. As you read the essay, did you sense that Catton respected either Grant or Lee more than the other? If so, go back through the essay and underline phrases and sentences that give this impression. If not, explain how he manages to maintain such even-handedness while describing contrasting figures.
2. How has your understanding of these men, or the Civil War in general, been changed after reading this essay?
3. Catton speaks of Grant and Lee as “representing two diametrically opposed elements in American life.” Without looking back to the essay, summarize these two aspects of America. Do you see any parallels to these two aspects in contemporary America?

Questions on Rhetorical Strategy and Style

1. Catton obviously uses the rhetorical strategies of comparison and contrast to shape the essay and develop its themes. Examining one paragraph at a time, make a brief outline of the essay that shows how Catton balances and finally integrates his exploration of the two men.
2. Like most effective writers arguing his ideas, Catton supports and develops his generalizations with examples—even in this brief, general essay. Reread the essay and take note of how specifics are used to demonstrate the abstract character traits Catton describes, such as these generals’ “utter tenacity.”
3. The essay’s title emphasizes differences between Grant and Lee, as does the opening statement about “one of the poignant, dramatic contrasts in American history.” Other phrases throughout the essay, such as “precise opposites,” further this contrast. Yet by the end of the essay we see Grant and Lee have become “very much alike.” How has the war brought about these changes in the two generals’ characters?

Writing Assignments

1. As a historian, Catton is interested in broad sweeping changes in a society or culture as well as the individual stories of individual people. When he ends this essay with the statement about “one of the great moments in American history,” we see again that the essay is about a much larger change in America. Choose a

different “moment” in U.S. or world history that you think represents a significant change from one time to another. Write an essay explaining that change.

2. Choose two people you admire: one a public figure, the other someone you have known personally. Write an essay in which you explore the admirable characteristics of both, looking for both similarities and differences.