Describe First, Compare Second

What is it?

A tool that uses a description step to help students conduct the kinds of thoughtful comparisons that Common Core Reading Standard 9 and other standards require

What are the benefits of using this tool?

Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001) report that developing comparative thinking skills can have a large and positive impact on student achievement. But what does it take to actually develop these skills? This tool outlines a simple process for teaching comparison in the classroom.* The key to its success lies in its insistence on having students *describe* individual items before actually comparing them. Asking students to "describe first, compare second" is a simple instructional move, but it's one that we've seen pay off in countless numbers of classrooms with countless numbers of students.

What are the basic steps?

1. Select two items for students to compare (e.g., texts, objects, individuals, events, or concepts). Start with familiar items like plates and bowls or apples and oranges.
2. Ask students to describe each item individually using the Description Organizer (p. 27). Guide the process by providing specific attributes, components, or criteria for students to focus on (e.g., Who are the main *characters* in each story? What is the basic *plot*?).

   Note: Very young students can work through Steps 2–5 as a class, and orally rather than on paper.
3. Have students use the information on their organizers to identify ways the items are similar and different. Encourage them to focus on the components they described in Step 2 when making these comparisons (e.g., How are the *characters* in the stories similar/different? The *plots*?).
4. Have students record the similarities/differences they identify on a Comparison Organizer (p. 28).
5. Assign a writing task that requires students to synthesize what they've learned from their analysis. Here are some options (the relevant Common Core Standards are noted in parentheses):
   - Explain how the items are similar and different. (W.CCR.2)
   - Take a position on whether the items are more alike or different. Justify your position. (W.CCR.1)
   - Compare how these two authors/texts addressed this theme, topic, or event. (R.CCR.9, RI.4–5.6)
6. Encourage students to use a "describe first, compare second" approach whenever they're faced with a comparison task (e.g., on a standardized exam).
7. Prepare students to handle comparison tasks independently by training them to scan task descriptions for hints about specific attributes/components to focus on, and by discussing the kinds of attributes they might want to focus on if attributes aren't provided. See Teacher Talk for details.

*This process is adapted from our Compare & Contrast strategy. For more on this strategy, see *The Core Six* (Silver, Dewing, & Perini, 2012) or *Compare & Contrast: Teaching Comparative Thinking to Strengthen Student Learning* (Silver, 2010).

How is this tool used in the classroom?

- ✔ To help students handle comparison questions more successfully
- ✔ To help students conduct more focused and organized comparisons

EXAMPLE 1: Primary

A second-grade teacher addressed Common Core RL.2.9 by helping students compare two different Cinderella stories (the version popularized by Walt Disney and Rafe Martin's [1992] retelling of an Algonquin version). The Description and Comparison Organizers that they generated as a class are shown below. The comparison paragraph that one student used these organizers to write is shown on the next page.

Notice how the aspects of the stories that students described in the Description Organizer became the focus for both the Comparison Organizer *and* the final written piece. (In other words, students described, then compared, then wrote about the same five things: main characters, personalities, wants, ending, and lesson.) Teaching students to do this same thing—to use their organizers to guide the pieces that they write—will help them produce higher-quality comparison essays.

DESCRIPTION ORGANIZER

Story 1: Cinderella	Describe these things:	Story 2: The Rough-Face Girl
Cinderella two stepsisters prince fairy godmother	Main characters	Rough-Face Girl two sisters Invisible Being
Cinderella is good and sweet. Her stepsisters are mean.	What the three sisters are like	The Rough-Face girl has a kind heart. Her sisters are mean.
They all want to marry the prince.	What the three sisters want	They all want to marry the Invisible Being.
The prince marries Cinderella instead of the mean sisters. They live happily ever after.	How the story ends	The Invisible Being marries the Rough-Face Girl instead of the mean sisters. They live happily ever after.
Good things happen to good people.	Lesson of the story	Good things happen to good people.

COMPARISON ORGANIZER ("TOP HAT" FORMAT)

	Cinderella:	The Rough-Face Girl:
Ways the stories are different	Cinderella has a fairy godmother to help her. Cinderella wants to marry a prince.	The Rough-Face Girl doesn't have a fairy godmother. The Rough-Face Girl wants to marry the Invisible Being.

Ways the stories are alike:

In both stories, the main character is nice and her sisters are mean.

In both stories, the main character and her sisters want to marry the same person.

Both stories end the same way. The nice sister gets married and lives happily ever after. The mean sisters don't.

Both stories teach the same lesson that good things happen to good people.

COMPARISON PARAGRAPH

I am comparing two Cinderella storys. One is called Cinderella the other is the rought face girl. One way both storys are alike is that the main character has two mean sisters. A second way they are alike is that in both storys all the sisters what to mary the same person but only the nice sisters gets to mary him at the end. Another way they are alike is that both storys teach you the same lesson. Something that is different is Cinderella has a fairy god mother to help her and the rought face girl dosent but for the other resons I told yow these two storys are a lot alike.

EXAMPLE 2: Elementary

A third-grade teacher used this tool to help her students analyze the development of a character over the course of a text (Common Core R.CCR.3). She did this by having them compare Wilbur from Chapter 7 of *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1952) with Wilbur from Chapter 15. The Comparison Organizer that one of her students generated can be seen at www.ThoughtfulClassroom.com/Tools.

EXAMPLE 3: Secondary

A middle school teacher designed the following comparative writing task around a segment of *Alive: The Story of the Andes Survivors* (Read, 1974/2002): "Compare Canessa and Parrado as expeditionaries. Consider the following attributes when making your comparison: physical strength, attitude, and knowledge." The Description Organizer that one student generated in preparation for this task is shown below. Notice how he recorded the page numbers where he found key details so he'd have an easier time referring to those details in his essay.

DESCRIPTION ORGANIZER

Character #1:	Describe these attributes:	Character #2:
Parrado		Canessa
• always taking the lead and going 1st (280-81) • motivated/strong	← physical st. →	• was always falling down and becoming weak (281) • tired/diarrhea (290)
• thinking about dad • motivated to keep going • happy when saw animals, green, can (285)	← attitude →	• thinking about God • wanted to keep on taking breaks • sad/mad and shouted "You'll kill yourself!" (284)
• had dumb ideas about killing cow, but was still motivated (295)	← knowledge →	• med. student • knew about vitamins, protiens, cow dung (289)

Teacher Talk

➔ The ability to compare is key to Common Core success. We see this most obviously with Reading Standard 9, but specific grade-level expectations within Reading Standards 3, 5, 6, and 7 require comparison as well. (RI.4.6, for example, requires students to compare different accounts of an event or topic.) Comparative writing is also required by the Common Core; it's part of Writing Standard 2.

➔ Prepare students to produce quality work by showing them examples of well-written comparison pieces, discussing the pieces' basic components and structures, and familiarizing students with linking/organizing words they can use to highlight similarities and differences (see p. 77 for a list).

➔ When students are conducting text-based comparisons, encourage them to include specific details and snippets from the texts on their organizers. Noting the page numbers where these items appear, as shown in Example 3, helps students incorporate these details into their final pieces. Building these details into their responses addresses Common Core Writing Standard 9 and Reading Standard 1.

➔ Clarify that the word "comparing" typically implies comparing *and* contrasting. ("If a question or prompt asks you to *compare* two things, you should discuss the similarities *and* the differences.")

➔ Use concrete examples like these to show students how test questions/task descriptions sometimes point to specific elements that they should focus on when conducting their comparisons:

Task 1: Compare the kinds of adaptations that enable the animals you read about to survive in their various habitats. You may wish to address adaptations involved in finding food, regulating body temperature, or avoiding predators. (Here, the task suggests specific kinds of adaptations that students might want to compare.)

Task 2: Compare George Washington's Farewell Address to the Monroe Doctrine. Analyze how both texts address similar themes and concepts regarding "entangling alliances."* (Here, the task asks students to focus on what the individual documents have to say about entangling alliances.)

➔ Talk to students about elements they might want to compare if none are suggested by the test question or task. For example:

- If you're asked to compare two *characters*, you might compare their personalities, adventures, experiences, or interactions with other characters.
- If you're asked to compare two *fictional texts*, you might compare their plots, settings, characters, themes, lessons/morals, illustrations, and/or writing styles.
- If you're asked to compare two *informational texts*, you might compare their factual content, structures, purposes, points of view, and/or quality of evidence.

➔ Use specific examples to teach students that comparative writing tasks won't always contain the words *compare* and *contrast*. Here is how a ninth-grade teacher did this using a task designed around Common Core RL.9–10.7:

"This task is asking you to analyze representations of the fall of man in two different artistic mediums, including what is emphasized or absent in each one. The word *comparison* doesn't appear anywhere in the task description, but it's a comparison task nonetheless. How can we tell?"

*This task is adapted from Appendix B of the Common Core ELA/Literacy Standards, p. 129.

Name: Date:

Description Organizer

Item or text #1:	Describe these attributes, aspects, or components:	Item or text #2:
	Beginning of Lesson Teacher Actions Student Actions During Lesson Teacher Actions Assessing Learning End of Lesson Actions	

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