



## Academic Writing Podcast 11 – Comparing and Contrasting

- Hello everyone! You are listening to Academic Writing Podcast
- Brought to you by the Higher School of Economics. My name is Katya
- And I am Grant. We are here today to discuss vocabulary and rhetorical strategies for comparing and contrasting.
- Thank you for being here, Grant. You know, I am currently writing a research paper on the critical discourse strategies of Russian and American students. And I ran into the problem of varying my vocabulary, as I seem to use too many of the same words, such as 'like' and 'unlike'. You know what I mean?
- I know exactly what you mean! And believe me you are not the only one who has this problem, but I do have good news for you: It can be solved rather painlessly!
- All right! I'm all ears!
- Ok, when you mentioned the topic of our meeting in the email, I started looking for a sample text for you to give you an idea of what you are aiming at. And I think I found a good one.
- Bring it on!
- Ok, here it is:

American Democrats and Republicans represent opposite ends of the ideological spectrum: Democrats traditionally hold liberal social views, whereas Republicans adhere to conservative ones. The differences between the two parties arise over a number of vital issues, such as government's role in the economy, personal welfare, and taxation. Generally, Democrats believe that government should regulate business, and that a lack of regulation led to the Great Depression of the 1930s and the credit crunch in 2008. On the contrary, Republicans claim to follow the economic principles of the founding fathers, who supposed that, as Thomas Jefferson put it, that government is best which governs least. Accordingly, Democrats suppose that government is responsible for the well-being of its citizens and therefore should support state welfare through various social programs. Conversely, Republicans encourage self-reliance and support the initiative to provide for one's own prosperity without public handouts. These approaches explain the two parties' preferences in fiscal policy: Democrats suggest increasing taxation in order to finance wealth redistribution, while Republicans push for lower taxes in order to stimulate wealth concentration. The two parties seem to have incompatible goals. At the same time, both of them claim to represent a country founded on the principles of a free-market economy, limited government intervention, and individualism.
- That sounds great! The author compared the two parties pretty well.
- Umm, not exactly compared...He contrasted them.
- Is there a difference?
- Sure. In English, 'to compare' means to highlight similarities, and 'to contrast' means to point out differences!
- Good to know! I never thought about it.



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- You live you learn.
- So, which contrasting terms did you catch?
- Well, I remember he used the noun ‘difference’, the phrase ‘on the contrary’, the adjective ‘opposite’, and something else. I need you to give me a whole list for me to memorize.
- Ok, so the author achieved his goal of contrasting the two parties by using 7 linguistic terms: ‘difference’ (a noun), ‘opposite’ (adjective), conversely (adverb), whereas and while (conjunctions), and two transition phrases: ‘on the contrary’ and ‘at the same time’.
- Sounds simple.
- It is. One of the basic rules of academic writing is that the language should not be too complicated – the meaning might be complicated, but the language should be simple.
- I agree. So, let’s go over each of these terms one by one.
- Ok, how about if I give you the words and word combinations and you make sentences with them.
- Deal.
- Each contrasting paragraph should start with a topic sentence in which you will signal the reader as to what you are going to talk about. In your case, you have to name the subjects and say whether you will compare or contrast them. You can use the words ‘difference’, or ‘different’, or ‘opposite’. So, can you make your topics sentence (the main idea of your paragraph)?
- Let me try. ‘Russian and American students exhibit opposite trends when it comes to debating strategies’.
- Good job! Opposite already tells me you are going to contrast them. But could you be more specific? You might wanna use another contrasting word.
- Ok. In particular, their argumentation, linguistic methods, and questioning suggest significant differences in approaches.
- Much better. The word ‘differences’ reinforces your initial statement. So, now you can introduce particular examples of the differences you mentioned. Start with ‘whereas’. This conjunction links two simple sentences into a compound sentence. And it can appear at the beginning of the first part of the sentence or the second part. Give it a try.
- Here. Whereas Russian students build their arguments around theoretical assumptions, their American counterparts prefer to turn to specific examples.
- Good. You can move ‘whereas’ in this sentence. For example, Russian students do this and that, whereas their US counterparts do that and this. Besides this, the conjunction ‘while’ has the same usage. It also allows us to contrast information in the two parts of a compound sentence.
- Got it. So, whereas and while are interchangeable.
- In this context yes.



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- Let's make another example with the adverb 'conversely'. This one usually appears in the very beginning of the sentence and is followed by a comma. In this case, it introduces a contrast to the information in the previous sentence. Your turn!
- Russian students tend to use compound sentences with a complicated structure filled with sophisticated terms. Conversely, American students keep the sentence structure simple, and filled with vivid language.
- Alright. In your paper, those would look like two separate sentences. The second sentence will start with 'conversely'.
- I will try to remember to put a comma after this word.
- Please, do. And again, this adverb 'conversely' can be substituted by the transitional phrase 'on the contrary', which is also followed by a comma. So you can say: "On the contrary, American students do this and that."
- I suppose that 'conversely' and 'on the contrary' are similar in usage to the transitional phrase 'at the same time'...
- Not really. 'Conversely' and 'on the contrary' usually contrast two different subjects, in your case, Russian and American students.
- Right.
- But the phrase 'at the same time' can also suggest contradictions in the actions of one and the same subject. Remember, in our sample paragraph the author wrote: The two parties seem to have incompatible goals. At the same time, both of them represent one country.
- I see now. So I can put it like this: Russian students use complicated structures. At the same time, they also try to incorporate vivid language.
- Yes, this OK. So, can you name all the contrast devices that we just used?
- I will try: difference, opposite, conversely, whereas, while, on the contrary and at the same time.
- Good job! Do you still feel that you lack some vocabulary?
- Yes, now I want to learn the same thing but for the actual comparison! I would also like to discuss the similarities between Russian and American students in my paper, too!
- Well, we would have to meet again for this as I would have to find another sample paragraph with good devices for you.
- I'd appreciate that! So, we'll see you soon?
- Alright! Get your examples ready!
- I will! And thank you so much for today. I am off to put it all down on paper!
- Good luck!<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Voices: Voices: Ekaterina Talalakina and Grant Newman