Contrast

Definition of Contrast

Contrast is a rhetorical device through which writers identify differences between two subjects, places, persons, things, or ideas. Simply, it is a type of opposition between two objects, highlighted to emphasize their differences.

Contrast comes from the Latin word, *contra stare*, meaning *to stand against*. Usually, though not always, writers use phrases and words to indicate a contrast such as *but, yet, however, instead, in contrast, nevertheless, on the contrary,* and *unlike*. for instance, E. B. White, in his novel *Stuart Little,* brings a contrast between Stuart and other babies, using the word *unlike*:

> "*Unlike* most babies, Stuart could walk as soon as he was born."

Types of Contrast

Point-by-point Contrast – In this type of contrast, writers deal with a series of features of two subjects, and then present their contrast, discussing all points successively.
Subject-by-subject Contrast – In this type of contrast, a writer first discusses one subject thoroughly, and then moves on to another.

Examples of Contrast in Literature

Example #1: *Eminent Men I Have Known, Unpopular Essays* (By Bertrand Russell)

> "To begin with the differences: Lenin was cruel, which Gladstone was not; Lenin had no respect for tradition, whereas Gladstone

had a great deal; Lenin considered all means legitimate for securing the victory of his party, whereas for Gladstone politics was a game with certain rules that must be observed. All these differences, to my mind, are to the advantage of Gladstone, and accordingly Gladstone on the whole had beneficent effects, while Lenin's effects were disastrous."

In this example, Russell presents a point-by-point contrast between two persons, Vladimir Lenin – a Russian communist revolutionary, and William Gladstone – a British Liberal politician. By the end, the author expresses his favor for Gladstone over Lenin.

Example #2: *Sonnet 130* (By William Shakespeare)

"My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks …"

In the first five lines of this poem, Shakespeare employs a number of contrasts to lay emphasis on his beloved's qualities. He contrasts her with the sun, coral, snow, and wire. Simply, he wants to convey the idea that, while his woman is not extraordinary, she is substantial.

Example #3: *A Tale of Two Cities* (By Charles Dickens)

Charles Dickens, in the very first chapter of his novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, presents a sweeping background of events and forces, which shape the characters' lives later on. In the first paragraph, he begins to share a dual theme, as he compares and contrasts the ideas of "best" and "worst" of times, "light" and "darkness," and then "hope" and "despair."

These contrasting ideas reflect images of good and bad that would recur in situations and characters throughout the novel. Dickens makes contrast

different and very similar situations simultaneously. The differences he compares are concepts of justice and spirituality in each country.

Example #4: *Romeo and Juliet* (By William Shakespeare)

William Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet* is about contrasts of love and hate. This tragic play embodies these emotions in different ways, as we see a [romance](#) between two young lovers, Romeo and Juliet, whereas their families are at war and hate each other. However, their love forbids this war.

Characters in this play also contrast each other. Romeo and Juliet, though both are lovers, are different too. Romeo is impulsive and dependent, while Juliet is organized, brave and practical. Montague's marriage is successful, while Capulet's is not. Along with a steady contrast in characters, we notice contrasts in mood, theme, and action of the play as well.

Function of Contrast

Writers address a number of features and characteristics of two subjects, persons, places, and events by contrasting them from one point to another. While the major purpose of contrast is to elucidate ideas and clear their meanings, readers can easily understand through this device what is going to happen next. Through opposite and contrasting ideas, writers make their arguments stronger, thus making them more memorable for readers due to emphasis placed on them. In addition, contrasting ideas shock the [audience](#), heighten [drama](#), and produce balanced structures in literary works.