



## Roots of Comparison and Contrast

Languages are rich in ways to compare and contrast things: to find similarities and differences in what we observe. On this page you can practice English words made from several Latin roots for these ideas. It begins with lists of common words that come from each root. Practice these words by reading about the importance of comparing, contrasting, and categorizing in our mental processes (a reading that touches on science, philosophy, and literature) and by matching words and their meanings.

*Similare*- to make like or copy and *Similis*- alike:

assemble, v.- to gather together

assimilate, v.- to make someone part of a group (& similar to others in the group)

dissemble, v.- to pretend to think or feel differently than you really do.

resemble, v.- to look like (someone or something)

similar, adj.- like (something else)

simulation, n.- a copy or imitation

Also assembly, assimilation, dissimilar, resemblance, similarity, simile, simulate. (Related: simultaneous-- at the same time.)

*Differre*-- to set apart: differ, difference, different, differentiate, differently.

*Distinguere*- to separate between: distinct, distinction, distinctive, distinctively, indistinct (all from the past participle), distinguish, distinguished.

*Comparare*- to liken, place together, or match (from *com* + *parare*- to provide, make ready, put in order- - also the root of prepare, repair, and separate.): comparable, compare, comparison.

*Contrastare*- to stand out against: contrast (noun or verb), contrasting.

In English, we use compare to discuss similarities: the ways in which something resembles something else. We use contrast when we want to highlight the differences between two things. So a common essay assignment is to “Compare and Contrast” two writers or books, ideas, systems, or proposals. Such an essay looks at both similarities and differences, and may also evaluate or judge which is best.

## Similarities and Resemblances

So many traits in different animals or different natural processes resemble each other. Scientists say that these traits or processes evolved to meet similar needs or fill similar niches, and that makes sense. But the resemblances go beyond just living things that could have evolved in similar ways. Even the stars and planets, the workings of matter and energy, show wonderful similarities of pattern. To me, it suggests that all were designed by the same Mind.

Similarities (as well as differences) enable us to categorize things: to organize them into related types or classes. For example, in biology we distinguish first between living and non-living things, then among the living between micro-organisms, plants, and animals; among animals between those with and without a backbone, and among vertebrates (animals with a backbone) between fishes, reptiles, amphibians, birds, and mammals, based on their structures, methods of reproduction, etc. Each new division contains creatures more and more closely related, until each scientific name (genus and species) includes only close relatives.

## Contrasts

Our senses are designed to focus on differences. If you show someone a large white sheet of paper with a small black circle on it and ask what they see, they will probably say ‘a black circle.’ In fact, the bulk (larger part) of what they see is empty white paper, but they *notice* the one thing that’s different. This is actually a survival mechanism-- the ability to see a small movement that’s different than the wind blowing all the bushes around. That different movement could be something we could catch and eat-- or something that could catch and eat us. So our brains are able to perceive and focus on even small differences from what’s normal.

Maybe that is why Latin and English (as well as other languages, I’m sure) have so many words for contrasts and distinctions-- for talking about what’s unusual or different. Like comparisons (seeing ways that different things are also similar), they are a basic part of our mental processing.

Many of these words are close synonyms. For example, ‘to distinguish’ and ‘to differentiate’ can both mean to recognize the difference between one related thing and another; to tell them apart. (They also have secondary meanings that are not synonymous. To distinguish can be to discern or perceive: “Cats can distinguish movement in the dark.” Differentiate can mean to develop differently: “As an embryo grows cells differentiate to form different kinds of tissue and organs.” )

## Comparisons

Much of communication involves comparing something known to something unknown. We have words for several kinds of comparisons. Metaphors, similes, and sometimes parables are frequent in literature (as well as ordinary speech) for the vivid pictures they give us. **Metaphors** are implied comparisons. They say something IS something else, but we understand them as comparisons rather than statements of fact. "His smile is the sun, lighting my life" is a metaphor. **Similes** express a comparison using the words 'like' or 'as': "his smile is like the sun," or "a smile as bright as the sun." **Parables** are stories that use familiar experiences to illustrate abstract or hard-to-understand ideas.

**Analogies** (from the Greek word for proportion, adopted into Latin, and via French to English) also compare things to show their similarities, but they are more educational than literary. People often use analogies to explain a new or difficult idea by comparing it to something the listener or reader already knows and understands: "Muscles are (like) machines that convert the energy from food into movement." (Note the analogy can take the form of a metaphor or a simile. It can also take a mathematical form, its original use: 'A is to B as C is to D,' or 'A tree is to a forest as a person is to a \_\_\_\_\_ [crowd].') Analogies have been popular in some vocabulary tests, with one of the terms left blank.)

Comparisons are not just interesting; they are essential to communication. Much of language is metaphor at some level. The most basic words describe the things we do, see and use in our daily living (hand, book, light bulb, touching something, running in a race.) However, to express ideas or anything intangible or abstract-- anything we cannot touch or point to-- we need to use some kind of analogy or metaphor. ("Hand me that book." "When he explained it I saw the light." "That child's tears touched my heart." "I'm running late," or "He's winning in the race of life.") Secondary meanings of words are often metaphorical: we talk about the 'wings' of a plane, that are not feathered or moving like bird wings, but do enable the plane to fly.

Some common metaphors include the 'seasons' of life (or the dawn, noon, and sunset of life, for childhood, young adulthood, and old age), using drugs as a crutch (a support for someone who can't stand on their own), or 'go for the gold' (compete to win the first prize-- the gold medal).

## Practice Words from Roots of Comparison & Contrast

Instructions: Match each word on the left with its meaning on the right.

- |                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| ___1. assimilation     | A. alike, resembling something else                                       |
| ___2. to compare       | B. having a small but recognizable difference from something else         |
| ___3. different        | C. to look at or discuss the resemblances between different things        |
| ___4. to differentiate | D. unclear; hard to distinguish   |
| ___5. distinct         | E. a likeness or similarity, especially in appearance                     |
| ___6. distinction      | F. a comparison between two things [using the words 'like' or 'as']       |
| ___7. indistinct       | G. to imitate or act like   |
| ___8. resemblance      | H. the process of becoming part of a group; becoming more like them       |
| ___9. similar          | I. the difference between things, or a mark of difference and superiority |
| ___10. simile          | J. not the same   |
| ___11. to simulate     | K. to point out the differences between similar things                    |

## Answers

H- 1. assimilation - the process of becoming part of a group; becoming more like them

C- 2. to compare - to look at or discuss the resemblances between different things

J- 3. different - not the same

K- 4. to differentiate - to point out the differences between similar things

B- 5. distinct- having a small but recognizable difference from something else

I- 6. distinction - showing the difference between things, or a mark of difference and superiority

D- 7. indistinct - unclear; hard to distinguish

E- 8. resemblance - a likeness or similarity, especially in appearance

A- 9. similar - alike, resembling something else

F- 10. simile - a comparison between two things [using the words 'like' or 'as']

G- 11. to simulate - to imitate or act like