

Compare & Contrast Sample Essay 4: Virtuous Franklin

The Writing Center at North Park University (Internal Version)
-Fall 2005

NOTE: You should see colored comment boxes on the side of the essay. If these do not appear, go to the **toolbar**, click **view** and then **comment**.

The best way to read commentary on essays is to begin at the end, because the last comment seeks to sum up the most important strengths and weaknesses of the paper. It gives you a perspective from which to read the more specific comments in the margins.

Virtuous Franklin

Throughout history there have been many influential people of virtue and reason.

Two people that are thought of as influential men of reason are Socrates and Benjamin Franklin. Both of these men lived in very different eras and had very different lifestyles. However, they both knew how to lead good lives. Though, it was Ben Franklin who lead and taught how to lead a virtuous life because he understood he world around him and it turn helped him become a better person.

Ben Franklin was a man who was first to live out the American Dream: the idea that one person can rise up in social class, become wealthy, and become scholarly. He was a self-motivated man who appreciated the art of learning, which was most important to him. But he, unlike many of his peers, was self taught. His leanings would bring him honorary degrees from both Harvard and Yale (Franklin 209). He felt that attending school didn't do much more than show people how to behave socially. He would alter go on to say that "because they think their purses can afford it will needs send them to the Temple of Learning, where, for want of a suitable genius, they learn little more than how to carry themselves handsomely and enter a room genteely," (Van Doren 23). Because of his background he was able to participate in many different events that others could not.

cmartin 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: See comments at the end about the broad scope of your introduction.

cmartin 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: Your thesis statement—the last sentence (fragment) here, right?—provides a way into an intriguing idea, and it looks like a setup for a good argument—though I'm not entirely sure I know what you mean by "he understood the world around him" or that this understanding helped him to be a better person. Could you provide some concrete information, so that readers know more clearly what you mean?

Administrator 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: This topic sentence is very broad—and is it really the topic of your paragraph? The paragraph seems to be more about what he thought real learning is. It would be helpful for readers if you could give us some guidance on why you're beginning your discussion with his contradictory (or only apparently contradictory?) attitude towards learning and schools.

Administrator 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: What do you mean by that?

Administrator 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: Good citation form!

Administrator 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: It would be helpful to your sentence's meaning if you provided an indicator of who "they" is referring to. It's legitimate to adjust small details of grammar in a quotation as long as 1) the change doesn't alter the writer's meaning, and 2) you indicate what you've changed by enclosing your redaction in square brackets. Here, it might look something like this: "because [wealthy people] think their purposes can afford it . . ."

One example being that he was able to comfortably retire from his printing press earlier than most could have and direct his attention towards his scientific experiments and bettering the world around him. It was through science where Franklin would find the answers he needed.

Socrates, who is the ultimate philosopher, would argue that the best way to learn is by asking questions. He asks us “how can we ever learn what we do not already know?” (www.philosophypages.com). Socrates would sit you down and ask “Why? Why?” until you understood what it is you are trying to do or, at least, appear that you understand.

Socrates goes on to say that “either we already know what we are looking for, in which case we don’t need to look, or we don’t know what we are looking for, in which case we wouldn’t recognize it if we found it,” (www.philosophypages.com). This raises another question. How are we supposed to know what we are looking for? He means that we are

born with a basic understanding of the world around us and that we simply just need to think about something for awhile and it will come to us. The only escape, according to Socrates, is to acknowledge that we already know what we need to know. This is not the correct way to be taught something that you do not know. What needs to happen is that

you need to learn about what it is you do not know. Meaning, that you need to be able to apply what you are learning. Franklin would say that the best way to learn something new is to learn a little about the subject and by simply going out and trying it. Even if what you did was the wrong approach, you will know that was not the correct way to do

it, and you will try again.

Administrator 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: Why make this important point so wordy? Try for lithe and lean prose. Extra words which convey little meaning just camouflage the meaning you really want to emphasize.

Administrator 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: Can you help me to follow your thinking by building a bridge between Franklin and Socrates? It would help your readers to see the relationship you see between the two thinkers. Something like “like Franklin, Socrates appreciated the art of learning; unlike Franklin, he . . .” Readers need to know, for instance, what the common points between Socrates and Franklin might be; here, it just looks as though you’re plunging into an unrelated topic.

Don’t forget to indent your paragraphs!

cmartin 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: You’re a shrewd reader of Plato!

Administrator 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: Good transition and development within the paragraph.

cmartin 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: Escape from what?

Administrator 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: Could you add some support for this claim? You’re contradicting someone you just called “the ultimate philosopher.” It’s fine to contradict an “authority” *if* you can provide sufficient explanation of why you disagree; it’s not very good argument just to assert that someone is wrong.

Administrator 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: A transition would do well here.

Administrator 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: Are you aware that this is the pragmatic approach to learning, characteristic of American thought from Franklin to Dewey?

Who is the “you” you’re writing to here?

Franklin understands that knowledge will not simply come in the middle of the night. We need to work at gaining knowledge and wisdom, both of which come from any type of experience. Through experience we learn what it means to live a good life. Early in his life, Franklin felt that he needed to do some good in his life and help those around him. Some of his accomplishments include; a fire station, the stove and a poor hospital. Every morning he would wake up from his slumber and ask himself the same question, "What Good shall I do this Day?" (Franklin 154). In the evening he would ask himself, "What Good Have I done today?" (154). More often than not, he would have done some good in his or someone else's life. Socrates would also help people, but he would do so by making them answer their own questions. Granted that Socrates lived 2400-plus years ago in a society based on tradition, still he would make anyone come to him, whereas Franklin would seek out people in need to help them. Tradition influences both Socrates and Franklin. Socrates lived in a time and place where it was looked down upon to disagree with the state, and to stray too far from what was viewed as normal. He was put to death for having an opinion. Franklin lived in a different era. He lived in a time of change, where his views shaped a nation. He broke free from the traditions of England and did what he needed to do to better himself. One of these things was serving his country in the military.

Both Franklin and Socrates served in their respective militaries. Both men fought bravely. One account tells us that Socrates risked his life to save Laches and Alcibiades who would later recall, "He just refused to leave me behind when I was wounded, and he rescued not only me but my armor as well," (Plato, 73). Franklin, too, served his country in the French-Indian War as a Colonial, but

Administrator 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: You seem to be saying indirectly that Socrates believes knowledge comes at unexpected times, from an unexpected source, so that you can contrast Franklin to him. Before readers can follow what you want to say about Franklin, they'll need to understand Socrates, so that we can see the concrete differences between them. Go ahead and give some supporting detail from Plato's text. Or, if you really didn't want to emphasize the "middle of the night" idea, then it would make sense to alter your topic sentence to fit more directly into what you do want to say.

Administrator 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: Whenever you use information from a source which isn't common knowledge, you need to cite the source.

Administrator 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: Good citation and use of a quote for support.

Administrator 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: Good setup for contrast. What exactly is your point of contrast, though? You start with how Franklin helped people, but you wind up talking about the attitude toward tradition in the societies that each of these men lived in. Are you launching a new topic here? If so, a new paragraph would help readers to follow your line of thought.

Administrator 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: I'm not sure what you mean here –could you clarify your point?

Administrator 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: GOOD transition from the last sentence of the previous paragraph into this one. (Point of information: Actually, BF was never a soldier like Socrates and the work he did at his front did not involve coming under hostile fire.) Now can you connect this topic back to your thesis statement? What does their military service have to do with the way they understood the world?

Administrator 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: Colonel? (238)

his rank was later stripped from him by the British military (Franklin 231). The question now is does serving the military make one virtuous? Does physical strength and bravery make one a virtuous person? The answer is no. Look at leaders throughout history.

Alexander the Great. Stalin. Mao. All of who were strong leaders who were looked to by their people, but none of these men were virtuous. None of these men were willing to

put someone above themselves. They alone were correct in their opinion and did not understand humility. Franklin shows true humility when his brother dies. What he did

was very characteristic of himself, he sent his sister-in-law 500 copies of *Poor Richard's Almanac* so that she could make money selling them. It wasn't only that she would be

making money from these books, she would be actively involved within her community. She would be making a living for herself, something very rare in the 1700s

(www.ushistory.org).

Virtue comes when the only thing that one strives for is good. Franklin made a list of thirteen virtues. He would practice one of these virtues a week until he became perfect.

After a few weeks he realized that no one can ever become perfect. This did not stop him from living a virtuous life however. He took it upon himself to become the best that was possible. Everyday he would try and do good in his life and help those in need. Socrates,

although doing good, tried to help those he could, but asking questions can only go so far in times of crisis. Action is far more important. It is by action that things can get done.

True, absolute virtue cannot be attained. For it to be absolute virtue it must come from something that is perfect and nothing can be truly perfect. Ben Franklin realized

this, but he did the best that he could. His accomplishments speak for themselves. Plato, Socrates top student, like Ben Franklin “wanted to discover the ultimate constituents of

Administrator 6/28/09 1:48 PM
Comment: Maybe these questions could be included in your topic sentences, since this is the reason why you tell us about BF's and S's military careers. It also is great because it relates directly to your thesis – do that more!

cmartin 6/28/09 1:48 PM
Comment: Is humility your understanding of virtue?

cmartin 6/28/09 1:48 PM
Comment: This section seems like a new topic beginning, since Franklin's humility seems a different idea than the one that F and S both fought bravely. Could you spell out a bit more directly how this action of F's exemplifies humility? It seems kind and generous, and probably especially thoughtful—but how is it humble? (It might well be an instance of humility—I just need your guidance to help me see what you do.)

Administrator 6/28/09 1:48 PM
Comment: Be more specific about your point in your topic sentence. Generalizations or blanket statements like this need to be connected to concrete information, if they're to be effective guides for the reader.

Administrator 6/28/09 1:48 PM
Comment: This seems an average American sentiment; what ideas or information are you offering to back up your claim? You appear to be presuming the rightness of the very point that you're also arguing about.

Administrator 6/28/09 1:48 PM
Comment: Another nonspecific topic sentence—as a reader, I want to know where you land in regards to BF vs. S, not your general philosophical view about virtue.

reality and the grounds for and knowledge of them,” (philosophypages.com). The “grounds for and knowledge of them: would be science and education. Franklin knew that in order to live a virtuous life he needed to know what the world was all about and it was through science and education that this was attained. He needed to know these things in order to understand how the world worked, and once that is understood, it is easier to see how virtue is attained. To make this happen, he knew that education was key.

Comparing Benjamin Franklin and the philosopher Socrates is like comparing apples and oranges. However, they were both men of great knowledge. They both understood that it is through wisdom and more importantly, virtue is the correct way to lead a life. Ben Franklin understood how to live virtuously. Socrates did not. Socrates knew that virtue was important but he could never reach it, he only understood his own opinion and why it was correct. His opinion on love being that everyone loves something because it is good (Plato 52) is skewed. He believes that what everyone loves is really nothing other than the good. This is wrong. There are many people what love o do what they know is wrong. St. Augustine for example, knew that stealing pears and giving hem to the pigs was wrong (St. Augustine 29) but that is the reason he sis that action. Franklin would try greatly to do some form of good every day. It was the first thing that he though about in the morning and one of the last things he would think about at night. Socrates would try to help people, but all he would do would be to convince people why they should do something a certain way. Franklin knew how to lead his life virtuously, Socrates did not.

Administrator 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: GOOD.

cmartin 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: OK—here you’re getting at the point your thesis raised. It’s an intriguing idea; I’d like to hear more details about it. For instance, how or why does understanding science make F more virtuous than S?

cmartin 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: I have some sympathy with your frustration—this was a tough assignment! But even apples and oranges *can* be compared, if the perspective or purpose makes sense.

Administrator 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: Tangle! H11

Administrator 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: I see where you’re going in this section, but I got a little lost...perhaps you could rearrange the ideas and sentences to make it flow better.

Administrator 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: Good use of another one of our texts to address an issue

Administrator 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: This seems more like a brand new topic than like concluding thoughts – maybe use it in a body paragraph to flesh out your argument? Or is it an unnecessary tangent?

Administrator 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: Now *that’s* concluding language!

Administrator 6/28/09 1:48 PM

Comment: Closing Thoughts: You’ve made a definite judgment of the relative value of the two thinkers and present your reasons. Your thesis, that F. is to be preferred S. as a guide to the good life is a great argument to single out.

Now—you’d have a much easier time with your paper if you confined yourself fairly strictly to the information you need to back up your thesis; you can’t write a very specific or convincing argument about all influential people in history in 6 pages—and that’s how your introduction begins. Why open the field of focus this far, then narrow it down to just these two thinkers? Your thesis can be an ally as well as a burden: it can tell you what you *don’t* need to pack into your essay (anything that doesn’t relate to the thesis) as well as what positive argument you need to make.

Now, about the argument: you seem to be a little lopsided in your sympathies. That’s OK if they’re based on a reasoned-out, self-conscious judgment, but you seem in this paper to be partial largely because Franklin’s ... [1]

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Now, about the argument: you seem to be a little lopsided in your sympathies. That's OK if they're based on a reasoned-out, self-conscious judgment, but you seem in this paper to be partial largely because Franklin's ideas, which are very typically American, are most familiar. You don't have much to say about *The Symposium*, yet it's the basis of your criticism of Socrates. It's OK to criticize—we ask you to think critically—but we ask you to criticize fairly ideas you have understood.

