Avoiding Faulty Comparisons

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Summary: Discusses how to avoid faulty comparisons, specifically how to avoid errors in degree of comparison, incomplete and ambiguous comparisons, and illogical comparisons.

Learning Objectives: To use the positive, comparative, and superlative degrees of comparison correctly. To use –er/-est or more/most when appropriate. To recognize and fix incomplete, ambiguous, and illogical comparisons.

We compare often: people, products, prices, etc. Sometimes artful (Shakespeare’s “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?/Thou art more lovely and more temperate”) and oftentimes prosaic (Your coworker saying passionately, “Harry Potter was better than Lord of the Rings!”), comparisons help us see commonalities and differences between and among people, things, and ideas.

Faulty comparison happens when the comparison is not complete or when the items that are being compared are in different categories, like apples and oranges. Faulty comparisons are illogical constructions, which often means that the ideas you intend to convey may not come through to your reader and may render statement or argument ineffective. In this handout, we’ll discuss several different kinds of comparison: errors in degree of comparison, incomplete and ambiguous comparisons, and illogical comparisons.

Avoiding Errors in Degrees of Comparison

The degree of comparison speaks to the three forms of adjectives that can be used when comparing items: positive, comparative, and superlative. Let’s discuss the degrees of comparisons along with common errors that writers make in forming comparisons.

The positive form refers to the unaltered version of an adjective, such as smart, funny, and young. This form can be used to compare items when combined with as. It is important to note that the adjective should have as prior to and following it in order for the comparison to be complete.

Ex. Josh is as smart as Kelsey.

When it comes to degrees of comparison, you should use comparative and superlative forms of adjectives.

The comparative degree is used when you are comparing two items. Most comparatives use the ending -er, like smarter, faster, and smoother (there are exceptions like less, which we will be discussing below), but some require you to use more followed by an adjective or adverb, such as more attractive.
Typically you will use the comparative degree in association with *than*.

Ex. He read Whitman’s poem **faster than** Cassie did.

Let’s discuss some guidelines for deciding whether you should use the –*er* ending or *more* when you use the comparative degree. Most one-syllable adjectives and two-syllable adjectives that end in *y* end in –*er* (*calmer and lovelier*), while adjectives with more syllables use *more* (*more beautiful*). However, you should keep in mind there are some exceptions to these guidelines because there are some two-syllable adjectives that use the ending –*er*, such as *simple*. As always, if you are not sure if an adjective should end in –*er* or use *more*, you can always look it up in a dictionary.

Note: If you are using adjectives that end in –*er* in the same list with adjectives that use *more*, the adjectives that end in –*er* should be listed before the adjectives that use *more*. You should also note that there is a specific order for presenting adjectives in a list: observation (pretty), physical description (size, shape, age, and color), origin (Spanish), material (cotton), and qualifier (normally already part of the noun, like *walking stick*).

Ex. She is smarter, smaller, and more beautiful than Kylie is.

**The superlative degree** compares three or more items and is considered the greatest degree. Many superlatives end with –*est*: *smartest, fastest,* and *smoothest*, unless the superlative ends with a *y* in which you would end with or –*iest*, like *happiest*. This rule also applies to the comparative degree that ends with a *y*, such as *easier*. Normally, the superlative degree is preceded by the *and* is followed by a noun in the sentence.

Ex. Karen has **the highest grade** in the group.

While we are discussing comparative and superlative degrees, let’s also discuss irregular adjectives and adverbs. These words are irregular because when you change the degree, you change the word completely instead of just adding –*er* or –*est* to the end. For example, the comparative form of *little* is *less*, and the superlative form is *least*. If you are unsure about whether the word changes completely or if it just needs –*er* or –*est* at the end, you should always check a dictionary.

Faulty comparison can also occur when a comparative ending in –*er* or a superlative ending in –*est* is used with words like *more, most, less, or least*. For example, you wouldn’t say *more taster*; you would say *tastier*. This kind of faulty comparison is called a **double comparative or double superlative**.

**Incorrect:** Brandon’s resume is more clearer than Daniel’s.

**Correct:** Brandon’s resume is clearer than Daniel’s.

Double comparatives and double superlatives are the markers of an unsophisticated writer or speaker.

Let’s also talk about absolute concepts in this section. There are certain words that are considered to be absolute and so cannot be logically compared, like *perfect* and *unique*. These words are considered to be absolutes because, by definition, there is not a
degree of comparison. Something is either perfect or it is not—there are no higher degrees of perfection.

**Incorrect:** Ernest wrote the most perfect correspondence today.

**Correct:** Ernest wrote a perfect correspondence today.

As you can see by the example above, the correspondence can be perfect, but it cannot be more than perfect. It is important to note that you can use adverbs, like *almost*, before the absolute. For example, the example above could be changed to “Ernest wrote a nearly perfect correspondence today.”

**Incomplete and Ambiguous Comparisons**

In order for the reader to understand what items are being compared, the comparison needs to be complete.

**Incomplete:** Xavier is not as mean.

This sentence is worded in a way that indicates there is a comparison, but the comparison is incomplete because we do not know what is being compared.

**Complete:** Xavier is not as mean as Abigail is.

This version of the example has a complete comparison of Xavier and Abigail. Comparisons must always be complete because otherwise the reader will not understand completely what is being said.

When writing a comparative sentence, the comparison must be clear so the reader will know what is being compared, otherwise the comparison is ambiguous.

**Ambiguous:** Naomi scored more points in this basketball game.

In the ambiguous example above, the reader does not know what is being compared—are we comparing Naomi’s points to the rest of the team’s points, to another specific player’s points, or that she scored more points in this game than she did in the rest of the games this season.

**Clear:** Naomi scored more points than she did in the last game.

This complete example is clear about what is being compared: Naomi’s performance in this game is being compared to her performance in the previous game.

As you can see, each of these examples includes either *as* or *than*. *As* and *than* often indicate that there is going to be a comparison in the sentence. You must be careful when using these terms, though, because when the sentence includes more than one noun that could be compared, the comparison can be ambiguous.

**Ambiguous:** Keith helped Amber more than Elizabeth on the homework assignment.

This sentence is ambiguous because we do not know if Keith helped Amber more than Elizabeth helped Amber or if Keith helped Amber more than he helped Elizabeth.
Clear: Keith helped Amber more than he helped Elizabeth on the homework.

Now, this comparison is clearer because we know the complete comparison—Keith helped Amber more than he helped Elizabeth.

Ilogical Comparisons
Ilogical comparisons occur when two or more items are compared, but the items are not in the same category. For example, you cannot compare Dickinson’s poetry with Whitman; you have to compare their poems (Dickinson’s poetry with Whitman’s poetry). For the most part, students tend to make this mistake because they think the sentence is self-explanatory. You must always include specifically what or who is being compared in order for the reader to understand fully what is being discussed.

Ilogical: The flowers in Quinton’s yard are prettier than Jacob.

This example includes a comparison between two items that are not in the same category—Quinton’s flowers (a person’s thing) and Jacob (a person). To fix this sentence, you have to compare the same kind of items.

Logical: The flowers in Quinton’s yard are prettier than the ones in Jacob’s yard.

This logical example compares both Quinton’s and Jacob’s flowers instead of flowers and a person.

Practice Exercises

This review will help test your understanding of how to correct faulty comparison.

1. I think it is more harder to understand Freud’s theory than Watson.
2. Thoreau’s writing is not as easy to read.
3. Winter is the most coldest season of the year.
4. During the Civil War, the North won more battles, which eventually led to the South’s surrender.
5. Sophia’s resume was more organized than Nick, but Nick’s resume included more information.
6. To some people, faulty comparison is more harder than faulty predication to overcome.
7. Sylvia found the most unique dress for her daughter’s baptism.
8. Slavery in the United States was much worse than Europe.
9. Marketing has a higher employee turnover rate than the rest of the company’s population.
10. John prefers smaller portions at lunchtime.
11. The many talents of Leonardo Da Vinci prove that he was more of a renaissance man.
12. Henry VIII thought that annulling his marriage to Catherine of Aragon to marry Anne Boleyn was the most perfect move on his part.
13. There seem to be more accidental overdoses now.
14. Leslie thinks that Joseph is not as qualified for the job.
15. Jan helped Dirk with his project more than Brandy on Saturday night.

Answers

1. I think it is harder to understand Freud’s theory than Watson’s.
2. Thoreau’s writing is not as easy to read as Hemingway’s.
3. Winter is the coldest season of the year.
4. During the Civil War, the North won more battles than the South did, which eventually led to the South’s surrender.
5. Sophia’s resume was more organized than Nick’s, but Nick’s resume included more information than Sophia’s.
6. To some people, faulty comparison is harder than faulty predication to overcome.
7. Sylvia found a unique dress for her daughter’s baptism.
8. Slavery in the United States was much worse than it was in Europe.
9. Marketing has a higher employee turnover rate than the rest of the company’s departments.
10. John prefers smaller portions than bigger portions at lunchtime.
11. The many talents of Leonardo Da Vinci prove that he was more of a renaissance man than Henry VIII was.
12. Henry VIII thought that annulling his marriage to Catherine of Aragon to marry Anne Boleyn was a perfect move on his part.
13. There seem to be more accidental overdoses now than there were a few years ago.
14. Leslie thinks that Joseph is not as qualified as Derek is for the job.
15. Jan helped Dirk with his project more than Brandy did on Saturday night.