



Ms. Particular Presents: Compare with vs. Compare to

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These brief “lessons” are designed to address common mistakes in English usage and to administer instruction in small doses.

Careful writers make a distinction between “compare with” and “compare to”

If you are putting two things side by side and examining how they are alike and how they are different, you are comparing one with the other

If you are stating only how one thing is *similar* to another, you are comparing it to the other

“Compare to” is often used figuratively, where actual comparisons between two things are impossible or imaginary

The following examples from *Physical Review Letters* all use the wrong preposition with “compare”; substitute “compare(d) with” for every instance.

“In Fig. 3, histograms of disruptions at three different loading rates are compared to the global fit obtained for $\nu = 2/3$.

“For small current values (curve 1), the vortex entries are shifted to lower magnetic field compared to the case of no applied current (not shown here).” (Why on earth you would make a claim based on a comparison and then not show it is a mystery to me.—*cme*)

“FIG. 4. MVPs of the CTBL transformed by the refined viscosity weighted transformation (solid lines) compared to the untransformed MVPs (short-dashed lines) and the empirical MVP of the ITBL (long-dashed dark yellow line) at $Re_{\delta_{\nu\omega}} = 550$.”

“These solvated states have lower volume and lower hydrogen-bond energy compared to other conformations of nonpolar solutes.”

“This difference can be caused by (1) a broader thickness distribution during film growth as compared to the thickness distribution measured after film growth by STM, and/or (2) elastic constants of ultrathin films which differ from their bulk counterparts.”

In science writing, “compare to” is almost always wrong

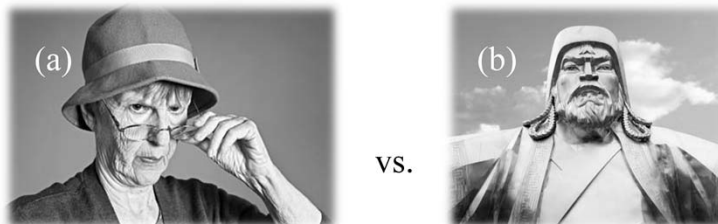


Figure 1. Figurative comparison of (a) Ms. Particular (MP) and (b) the Mongol emperor, Genghis Khan (GK). Compared to MP, GK was a model of moderation. Note the similarity of headgear. Photos courtesy istockphoto.com.

In this case, “compare to” is correct, because the author is stating the similarity between the two personalities, not contrasting one with the other.

The Latin abbreviation *cf.* means “compare with,” not “refer to.”

Although hardly anyone besides Ms. Particular uses *cf.* nowadays, it is still a handy abbreviation to have in your arsenal and saves you from having to remember which preposition to use after “compare.”

For more useful but endangered-list Latin abbreviations, see <http://people.physics.illinois.edu/Celia/Latin.pdf>.