

# COMPARISON – LIFE IN 1750 AND TODAY

## Purpose

Comparison is a key process that historians use to help them better understand the past. While comparing and contrasting is something that you’ve likely engaged in prior to this course, in this activity you’re introduced to a systematic way of conducting historical comparison. The ultimate goal is for you to be able to describe and explain the relevant similarities and differences between specific historical developments and processes, and to be able to explain the relative historical significance of similarities and differences between the topics of study. In addition, you’ll learn to use the Comparison Tool (which you’ll see an example of in this activity’s worksheet) to conduct and generate historical comparisons.

## Practices

### *Reading*

You’ll conduct historical comparison both as part of reading historical accounts and as part of generating your own historical interpretations. This comparison activity also has you look at two points of time and place (temporal and spatial scale). Try to use the language of spatial scale when describing your comparisons (for example: local, regional, national, and global).

## Process

Although comparing and contrasting may sound simple, it actually gets really complicated when what you’re comparing is multidimensional, as is the case with historical topics. Because comparison is harder than it looks, your teacher will show you a tool you can use to conduct historical comparisons using the frames you learned about earlier in this lesson.

First, your teacher will either hand out or have you download the Comparison—Life in 1750 and Today worksheet. Review the questions associated with each of the frames. The questions in the left-hand column of the worksheet have been selected because they are most relevant to this particular comparison. As this is the first comparison activity of the course, you’ll complete this one together as a class. Your teacher will guide you through the process of using these questions to fill in the top few rows of the worksheet.

Before you read the synopsis about life in 1750, decide which period you’d rather live in—1750 or today. Be sure to explain your choice.

Next, read the synopsis of life in 1750. This is a general story of what life was like in the mid-eighteenth century, so the specifics would change depending on geographic location, ethnicity, age, gender, and social class. Your teacher may also have you read one or more of the region-specific paragraphs for what life was like in 1750.



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Then, as a class, fill out the first part of the worksheet using the synopsis for 1750. Next, do the same thing to complete the sections for life today, using your own knowledge of today to fill out those columns. Remember that *community* focuses on how people organize into groups, usually with shared values or beliefs as well as being inhabitants of the same region or nation. *Production and distribution* refers to how people make goods and get them into the hands of other people. For example, do they make goods at home or in a factory? Do they travel to markets to sell these goods or do they trade with neighbors? *Networks* refers to how people connect with others, sometimes through work-related connections or through trade or, in the twenty-first century, via social media and the Internet. Once you have filled out the Today section with the class, discuss the following questions:

- How are these stories similar?
- How are they different?
- What's important about those similarities and differences?

Now that you've learned more about life in 1750 versus today, would you change the answer you gave at the start of this activity about which period you'd rather live in? Be prepared to share your reasoning with the class.

Once everyone has completed the rows relating to the frames, you'll review the answers together, and then work in small groups to identify similarities and differences between life in 1750 and today, and you'll then add them to the similarities and differences sections of the Comparison Tool.

Finally, you'll come back together as a class to share the similarities and differences your group came up with.

Don't worry—if your teacher chooses to have you do this activity extension, they'll walk you through the definition of a thesis statement and show you how to create a thesis statement that answers a comparison prompt.

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## LIFE IN 1750 AND TODAY

Note that these are general stories of life in major geographic regions—details of everyday life might be quite different depending on one's gender, class, age, ethnicity, and geographic region.

### ***SYNOPSIS OF LIFE IN 1750 – GENERAL OVERVIEW***

The vast majority of people were farmers living in rural areas. Only a small portion of the total population lived in urban areas, but cities had begun to grow more rapidly than ever before. Some communities, especially those of Indigenous peoples in the Americas and Australasia, were foragers or pastoralists. For those belonging to the lower classes, life consisted of work, usually on a farm where they grew and raised most of their food. Daily

interactions were with other members of the same community, some of whom may have lived quite far from each other. Members of the same family may have gone to market once or twice a month to sell goods they'd raised or made. Both men and women worked to support the family, but their jobs could be different, depending on the region or society in which they lived. In some regions of the world, women sewed, tended to the house, and helped with farming duties including planting and harvesting. Men were generally farmers, who tended to the crops and animals. However, in agro-pastoralist communities (places where people both farmed and herded livestock) such as those in sub-Saharan Africa, women were the ones who did a large portion of the farming duties while men often were in charge of the animals. For those in the middle to upper classes, who usually had more wealth than those of the lower class, life could be very different. In certain regions, some children were educated, particularly boys, although girls were increasingly given access to education, such as reading, writing, and mathematical skills. Most children started working at a young age, either helping with the farm, family business, or learning a trade as an apprentice. Many women worked in the textile industry but produced items in their homes rather than in a factory or industrial setting (although this began to change in some regions during the eighteenth century). Those living in urban areas worked in a variety of industries as merchants, smiths (working with metals), carpenters, blacksmiths, and printers. People living in cities had many interactions in the course of their day and therefore may have belonged to different networks including those associated with their job, their faith, and their government. Most people didn't travel very far from their homes but some, such as those emigrating to the Americas, ventured out and explored new areas.

### ***SYNOPSIS OF LIFE IN 1750 – REGION-SPECIFIC SUMMARIES***

**Africa**—Life in Africa was extremely varied and depended largely on one's geographic region. Many communities had existed for thousands of years. Some were structured in large agrarian empires and kingdoms while others were semi-nomadic pastoralists. The coastal regions traded with those from Europe and Asia. The transatlantic slave trade was one of the most lucrative trades of the eighteenth century. The demand for enslaved Africans increased substantially during this period and many Africans, mainly men but some women as well, living on the west coast of the continent made a great deal of money from this trade. Many communities were affected by the slave trade, as many men, women, and children were taken from their homes and shipped to the Americas.

**Americas**—If you were an immigrant from Europe, life in North America was concentrated along the Atlantic seaboard. There were a number of Indigenous communities living on the outskirts of these colonies and in the interior of the region all the way to the Pacific coast. The Spanish Empire had grown considerably from its beginnings in the sixteenth century and the large empires of the Aztecs and Incas were just a memory to most. Those with European ancestry were generally in positions of privilege while Indigenous peoples continued to be discriminated against. Most people were farmers but there were many other professions, such as book and pamphlet printers, craftspeople, and merchants. A large portion of those living in this region arrived as captives from Africa and were enslaved. They mainly resided on large plantations in the south of North America and in areas of the Caribbean

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and South America. Children often labored on farms and in factories that had begun popping up in coastal regions of North America. While schools had been established, many of those in the lower classes worked for 12 or more hours every day to support their families. In most of the major cities of North and South America as well as the Caribbean, ideas about freedom, liberty, and natural rights were becoming more popular. There was also a great deal of resentment about unfair taxes and trade restrictions placed on the colonies by their governments in Europe.

**Asia**—Most people were farmers and lived in rural areas. Populations were larger in this area, so farming was essential to supply the necessary food for life. Most lived under the rule of an emperor or monarch. Those of the lower classes labored daily either on farms or in other professions, such as mining or as merchants. Trade was an important profession and Asian goods were in high demand in areas such as Europe and the Americas. Those of the upper classes lived quite comfortably, usually in more urban areas. These people would have been government officials, members of court, or merchants.

Many urban communities were composed of a number of different ethnicities, especially those engaged in the business of trade. European nations began demanding greater access to trade along coastal regions of Asia at this time, which would lead to skirmishes and wars. As a result, many Asian governments reluctantly began to allow more Europeans access to ports.

**Australasia**—Indigenous peoples had lived on these islands for thousands of years. Those groups included communities such as the Māori, Australian Aboriginal peoples, and Pacific Islanders. Some of these groups farmed and fished for survival and many had complex community structures like hierarchies and rulers. As Europeans continued their explorations and colonization of the world, they encountered Indigenous peoples, which had the effect of greatly reducing those populations through disease and war. Europeans eventually colonized many of these regions and establish new nation-states such as Australia and New Zealand. In many areas, the Indigenous communities suffered as more Europeans arrived and set up their own communities and governments. The Māori of New Zealand won the largest number of concessions from the European (in this case British) invaders, but their numbers and power were greatly reduced as a result of colonization.

**Europe**—Most people were farmers and lived in rural areas of Europe. For those living in cities, daily activities would differ depending on class (upper, middle, or lower) and gender. Many were artisans or worked from home in a variety of professions, such as those who worked with textiles, metal, and glass, as well as carpenters, masons, and printers. Those of the upper class dressed in fine clothes with wigs and participated in conversations at salons or in discussions about the arts and politics. Most people lived under the rule of a monarch, but new ideas about politics—such as sovereignty, natural rights, and freedom of the press—had started to be discussed by the middle class. Children of the lower and middle classes worked most of their days to help support their families and to learn the trades of their parents or other family members. During the 1750s, much of Europe was also involved in wars that extended to other regions of the world including the Americas, India, and West Africa (the Seven Years' War and the French and Indian War). In addition, new ways of producing goods were introduced in this era as the British led the way in industrializing with their use of the steam engine.

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Name:

Date:

**Part 1: Identifying and Describing**

- 1. Write the topic of comparison at the top of the chart, and then add the cases you’re comparing and their associated time periods and locations.
- 2. Respond to the questions in the Part 1 chart for each case you’re comparing. Use the resources provided.
- 3. After responding to the questions for each case, identify and describe the similarities and differences between these cases.

**Part 2: Analyzing (Optional Extension)**

- 1. If you were going to write two essays about the similarities and/or differences you’ve identified for this topic, what are two thesis statements you might use? Write one thesis statement about similarities and one about differences.
- 2. If required, use your thesis statements to craft a response to the comparison prompt for this activity.

**Topic of Comparison**

**Part 1: Identifying and Describing**

Cases You’re Comparing		
Time Period		
Location		

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<b>P&amp;D</b>  <i>How were goods produced and distributed in each of these periods of time?</i>		Similarities	
		Differences	
<b>Networks</b>  <i>What types of networks were people members of in each of these periods of time?</i>		Similarities	
		Differences	
<b>Community</b>  <i>How were communities structured in each of these time periods?</i>		Similarities	
		Differences	

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## Part 2: Analyzing (Optional Extension)

Thesis Statement 1: Similarities	
Thesis Statement 2: Differences	
Response	