

## **EXAMPLE COMPARE & CONTRAST ESSAY**

**Prompt:** Write an Informative Theme to compare and contrast gorillas and humans on at least three dimensions for comparing and at least three dimensions for contrasting. Be sure to include in-text citations where needed, as well as a reference list. Use the MLA style.

TITLE OF PAPER: Gorillas: Are They Our Close or Distant Cousins?

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### Gorillas: Are They Our Close or Distant Cousins?

Humans have an animal relative called the gorilla. Gorillas look so much like humans that explorers on the West African Coast around 500 B.C. thought that gorillas were a tribe of hairy people (“Gorilla,” 1). They were given their name “gorilla” by an explorer because the word “gorilla” means “hairy people” (“Gorilla” 2). Like chimpanzees and orangutans, gorillas are anthropoids which means “man-like” (“Webster’s” 38). Determining whether gorillas are humans’ close or distant cousins relates to their many characteristics, some of which are similar and dissimilar to human characteristics, including physical characteristics, use of their hands, intelligence, social life, and daily activities.

#### **Physical Characteristics**

Most obviously, gorillas have some similarities to humans physically. Like humans, they can stand upright and can walk on two feet. Gorillas do this mainly when they are carrying something or using a tool. Adult humans walk around on two feet whenever they move around. Additionally, gorillas are about the same height as humans when standing. The average height of male gorillas is five feet six inches (“All about gorillas” 2); however, male gorillas have been known to stand as much as six feet four inches tall (“What is” 1). In the U.S., the average height of a human male is five feet ten inches (“Template” 2). Like humans, gorillas have fingerprints that are unique. All gorillas and humans can be identified solely by their fingerprints.

Interestingly, gorilla DNA is very similar to human DNA. From ninety-five to ninety-nine percent of their DNA matches human DNA (“DNA” 1).

Nevertheless, there are differences in gorillas’ appearance when compared to humans with regard to their weight, body covering, the length of their arms and legs, and body movement. First, both male and female gorillas are typically heavier than their human counterparts. Male gorillas weigh about 400 pounds, and female gorillas weigh about 200 pounds (“All about gorillas” 2). The normal human weight is much lower, with the average male weighing 195 pounds and average female weighing 165 pounds (“Body Weight” 2). Second, most of gorillas’ bodies are covered by thick fur. Only the palms of their hands, soles of their feet, noses, lips, and ears do not have fur. In contrast, most humans have hair on only a few body parts including their heads, arms, and legs. Third, the muscles in gorillas’ arms are larger than the muscles in their legs. This is the opposite of human arms and legs, where muscles in their legs are larger than the muscles in their arms. Also, gorillas’ legs are shorter than their arms. Again, this is the opposite of humans, where their legs are longer than their arms. Finally, gorillas mostly walk around on all fours, putting weight on the knuckles of their hands. This means that they are bent over most of the time that they are traveling. In contrast, humans mainly walk on their feet and appear upright.

### **Tool Usage and Intelligence**

Another way in which gorillas are similar to humans is that they use their hands in similar ways. Their hands have five fingers including opposing thumbs, which means they can manipulate objects like humans do. In fact, they have been known to use tools with their hands. For example, gorillas are known to use a stick to determine the depth of water. When one gorilla tried to cross a pool of water and the water reached her waist, she retreated and started to use a

stick to determine how deep the water was before choosing her crossing route. Gorillas have also been known to hold onto a stick to support themselves while fishing in water. They position the stick in the mud at the bottom of a pool and lean on it. Another gorilla was seen using a tree trunk to support her digging activities. Then she used it as a bridge to move across swampy ground. Other gorillas have been known to use sticks to dig termites out of a fallen tree. Also, a gorilla was seen breaking up a rock. He used its sharp edge to scrape bark off a tree. Clearly, humans might use the same kinds of tools with their hands as gorillas if they were living in the wild.

Nevertheless, although gorillas use very simple tools, they do not appear to be as intelligent as humans. Even though gorillas' heads are large, their brains weigh less than half of human brains. Gorilla brains weigh about 500 grams; human brains weigh about 1,250 grams ("Brain facts" 1). That means they have fewer brain cells than humans. Not surprisingly then, although gorillas communicate with each other using vocalizations, they do not seem to be capable of learning an oral language like humans do. Typical ways that gorillas communicate include sounds, touch, facial expressions, and hand gestures. Some scientists have been able to teach a few gorillas sign language, but opinions differ on how skilled these gorillas have become with signing. Gorillas make about 22 sounds ("Gorilla king" 1), while humans make hundreds of sounds and can learn several languages plus sign language. Interestingly, some scientists have estimated that the IQ of the gorilla who learned sign language is about 70 to 92 (below average for humans) (Patterson & Gordon 3). Other scientists do not agree with this estimate, though; they think it is too high. In contrast, the average human IQ is 100, with IQs ranging from 60 to more than 160 (de la Jara 1).

### **Social Life and Activities**

Despite this difference in intelligence, gorillas seem to be similar to humans with regard to their general social life. Interestingly, scientists have found that gorillas live together in families. Their family groups are called “troops,” and they typically range in size from 3 to 30 gorillas. The largest observed family had 65 members (“The gorilla king” 2). Human families, including extended family members (grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins), can be just as large. Importantly, the head of each gorilla family is a male called a “silverback” (“Gorilla” 4). This is an older male with gray hair on his back. His job is to protect the members of the troop and make decisions for the group. Human families have historically been led by males, and in many cultures are still led by males. Not surprisingly, female gorillas and female humans are, in general, in charge of taking care of the babies in their families. They feed and groom the children. These social arrangements for gorillas are similar to human relationships where many pairs of human males and females stay together throughout their lives and care for their children together.

Even though gorillas and humans might organize as families, where they differ relates to their daily activities within the family group, including eating, sleeping, and other activities. Each day, with the silverback as their leader, a gorilla troop walks around finding and eating food. Gorillas spend most of their time eating. Upon awakening, they eat all morning and then take a nap in the afternoon during the hottest part of the day. In the late afternoon and early evening, they eat until the sun goes down. Overall, they mostly eat plants, including wild banana, wild celery, ginger, and tapioca. They can each eat as many as 40 pounds of leaves and roots in one day (“What do gorillas eat?” 1). Interestingly, they rarely eat something other than plants. They might occasionally eat a bird’s egg or an insect. They rarely drink water; they obtain

moisture from the plants they eat. In contrast, humans have a varied diet including all kinds of plants, meats, and dairy products. They drink water and other beverages. They eat at particular times during a day. They are awake during the whole day; only their children take naps. Moreover, humans spend their time doing a variety of activities besides eating and sleeping.

### **Summary**

In sum, gorillas are similar to and different from humans in a variety of ways. Even though the general appearance of gorillas is like the human appearance in some ways, their differences create a totally different visage. The hairiness of gorillas is probably the most distinctive characteristic in this regard. Although their similar hands allow gorillas to use very simple tools like humans do, gorilla brains are not similar in size to human brains. So far, gorillas have not been able to learn a language other than sign language. Nevertheless, gorillas have close family groups similar to humans' extended families, but they spend most of their time eating and sleeping. Because of these similarities and differences, gorillas may be relatives to humans within the animal kingdom, but they are probably distant cousins rather than first cousins!

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