Task: Meaningful Difference

Situation: This task is for use with clients who are in the planning or early drafting stage of work that involves comparison of two or more things, and who are having difficulty seeing beyond mere simple similarity.

Instructions: Ask the client to do four comparisons involving meaningful difference: two related to content or thematic similarity, and two related to formal/structural similarity. You may have to spend some time explaining the difference (and if it seems that a grasp of the distinction is beyond the clients current cognitive ability, let it go, and just tell them to find four meaningful differences). Give them about 10 minutes to complete the task.

Outcome: With luck, a richer and more complex view of the relationships between the things being compared. Discuss with the client how to incorporate into a draft any of the differences that seem to work.
Meaningful Difference Task

The point of this exercise is to see beyond simple similarity when trying to compare two things (this works for any two things: assigned readings, websites, advertisements, films, works of art, etc.). The idea is that “meaningful difference” is a difference between items that have already been shown to be similar (differences between things that are obviously different is, well, obvious and meaningless).

Here’s how it works: find and point to some key similarity between the things being compared (as in, “domesticated cats and dogs both display obvious signs of the hunting instinct”); that’s the “Similarity of evidence.” Then the trick is to point out how the things are different with respect to that similarity (as in, “while cats tend to be stealthy hunters, lying quietly in wait for their chance to strike, dogs tend to charge directly at the prey as soon as they sight it”).

The “Narrative/Thematic Complexity” refers to the content (if the things being compared are works of literature, art, etc.) or to the theme of design (if the things are objects; the comparison above is an example of thematic complexity); “Formal Complexity” refers to the appearance and/or structure of the things being compared (e.g., “both Milky Way and Snickers bars consist of nougat topped with caramel, coated in milk chocolate, but Snickers has peanuts, and Milky Way does not”).

Type your responses into the form below. Take about 10 minutes; it’s OK if you don’t complete all of the task in that time, but try to finish if you can.

I. Narrative/Thematic Complexity
   A. 1. Similarity of evidence:
   A. 2. Meaningful difference:
   B. 1. Similarity of evidence:
   B. 2. Meaningful difference:

II. Formal Complexity
   A. 1. Similarity of evidence:
   A. 2. Meaningful difference:
   B. 1. Similarity of evidence:
   B. 2. Meaningful difference: