

Any comparison of two or more objects ordinarily assumes some conflict between the objects. For instance, people would not ordinarily argue that a free press is more important than a fair trial unless someone thought that one concept somehow interfered with the other. How might two objects conflict with each another? Consider some simple examples. Would a person rather smoke or have healthy lungs? Here is a case where smoking is in direct conflict with healthy lungs, with the conflict between these two activities clear. Some cases are not so clear. Is cake better than ice cream? Why ask since one can have cake and ice cream? But a person on a restricted-sugar diet may be allowed to have one but not the other. In this sense, the two objects are in conflict. Is a trip to the beach better than a trip to the mountains? Some might answer that they can do both, but others might only have the time or resources to do one. If so, traveling to the beach is, in a sense, in conflict with traveling to the mountains. Is a fair trial more important than a free press? On first glance most would say they are equally important and people should have both. But what if the press wants to release information to the public that would interfere with a defendant's right to a fair trial? So one of the important differences between a simple value proposition and a comparative one is that a simple value proposition is about a single object of evaluation, whereas a comparative value proposition is about arranging multiple concepts into a value hierarchy.

COMBINING CLAIMS TO SUPPORT A COMPARATIVE VALUE PROPOSITION

A combination of descriptive, relational, and evaluative claims can support a simple value proposition; comparative value claims follow the same pattern although the particulars are a little different. In the following sections, we show how the “describe, relate, evaluate” process can be used to support a comparative value proposition. To illustrate the process, we will use the proposition “Life in prison without parole is better than capital punishment.”

Describe one or more features of each object to be evaluated. In the case of simple value propositions, you describe one or more features of the object of evaluation. In the case of a comparative value proposition, you must describe one or more features of each of the objects to be compared. Not just any features will do. You must carefully select the features you will describe, with an eye to how the concepts are in conflict with each another.

As we said earlier, debaters probably would not be comparing two things in terms of their value unless somehow those two were in conflict. You should center the argument about the comparative value of the objects in the region of that conflict. Thus, you should examine the features of each object and determine which are central to the dispute. This careful selection process will determine the features you should describe and on which you will ultimately build your case.

Consider our example about comparing the concept of capital punishment with that of life without parole. To build a case supporting life without parole as an alternative to the death penalty, you should first think of features both objects share—features central to the conflict between capital punishment and life without parole. At this point in the process, you should not consider whether the features demonstrate conflict; your goal is to generate features. Here are