qualities in El Greco; the second half tells the reader about five different qualities in Rembrandt. You will notice in the following student essay that the second half occasionally looks back to the first half.

SAMPLE ESSAY: A STUDENT'S COMPARISON

This essay, by an undergraduate, discusses one object and then discusses a second. It lumps rather than splits. It does not break into two separate parts because at the start it looks forward to the second object, and in the second half of the essay it occasionally reminds us of the first object.

When you read this essay, don't let its excellence lead you into thinking that you can't do as well. The essay, keep in mind, is the product of much writing and rewriting. As Rebecca Bedell wrote, her ideas got better and better, for in her drafts she sometimes put down a point and then realized that it needed strengthening (e.g., with concrete details) or that—come to think of it—the point was wrong and ought to be deleted. She also derived some minor assistance—for facts, not for her fundamental thinking—from books, which she cites in footnotes.

Brief marginal annotations have been added to the following essay in order to help you appreciate the writer's skill in presenting her ideas.*

Rebecca Bedell

FA 232 American Art

Title is focused and, in "Development," implies the thesis

John Singleton Copley's Early Development:
From *Mrs. Joseph Mann* to *Mrs. Ezekial Goldthwait*

Opening paragraph is unusually personal but engaging, and it implies the problem the writer will address

Several Sundays ago while I was wandering through the American painting section of the Museum of Fine Arts, a professorial bellow shook me. Around the corner strode a well-dressed mustachioed member of the art historical elite, a gaggle of note-taking students following in his wake. "And here," he said, "we have John Singleton Copley." He marshaled his group about the rotunda, explaining that, "as one can easily see from these paintings, Copley never really learned to paint until he went to England."

*Rebecca Bedell, *Mrs. Mann and Mrs. Goldthwait*. Copyright 1981 by Rebecca Bedell. Used by permission of the author.

A walk around the rotunda together with a quick leafing through a catalog of Copley's work should convince any viewer that Copley reached his artistic maturity years before he left for England in 1774. A comparison of two paintings at the Museum of Fine Arts, *Mrs. Joseph Mann* of 1753 (Figure 1) and *Mrs. Ezekial Goldthwait* of ca. 1771 (Figure 2), reveals that Copley had made huge advances in his style and technique even before he left America; by the time of his departure he was already a great portraitist. Both paintings are half-length portraits of seated women, and both are accompanied by paired portraits of their husbands.

Thesis is clearly announced

The portrait of Mrs. Joseph Mann, the twenty-two-year-old wife of a tavern keeper in Wrentham, Massachusetts,[1] is signed and dated "J. S. Copley 1753." One of Copley's earliest known works, painted when he was only fifteen years old, it depicts a robust young woman staring candidly at the viewer. Seated outdoors in front of a rock outcropping, she rests her left elbow on a classical pedestal and she dangles a string of pearls from her left hand.

Brief description of the first work

The painting suffers from being tied too closely to its mezzotint prototype. The composition is an almost exact mirror image of that used in Isaac Beckett's mezzotint after William Wissing's *Princess Anne* of ca. 1683.[2] Pose, props, and background are all lifted directly from the

Relation of the painting to its source

[1]Jules David Prown, *John Singleton Copley* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), I: 110.

[2]Charles Coleman Sellers, "Mezzotint Prototypes of Colonial Portraiture: A Survey Based on the Research of Waldon Phoenix Belknap, Jr.," *Art Quarterly* 20 (1957): 407–68. See especially plate 16.

Figure 1. John Singleton Copley, American, 1738–1815. *Mrs. Joseph Mann (Bethia Torrey)*, 1753. Oil on canvas, 91.44 × 71.75 cm. (36 × 28 ¼ in.). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Frederick H. Metcalf and Holbrook E. Metcalf, 43.1353.

Figure 2. John Singleton Copley, American, 1738–1815. *Mrs. Ezekiel Goldthwait (Elizabeth Lewis)*, 1771. Oil on canvas, 127.32 × 101.92 cm (50 1/8 × 40 1/8 in.). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Bequest of John T. Bowen in memory of Eliza M. Bowen, 41.84.

print. Certain changes, however, were necessary to acclimatize the image to its new American setting. Princess Anne is shown provocatively posed in a landscape setting. Her blouse slips from her shoulders to reveal an enticing amount of bare bosom. Her hair curls lasciviously over her shoulders and a pearl necklace slides suggestively through her fingers as though, having removed the pearls, she will proceed further to disrobe. But Copley reduces the sensual overtones. Mrs. Mann's bodice is decorously raised to ensure sufficient coverage, and the alluring gaze of the princess is replaced by a cool stare. However, the suggestive pearls remain intact, producing an oddly discordant note.

First sentence of paragraph is both a transition and a topic sentence: the weakness of the painting

The picture has other problems as well. The young Copley obviously had not yet learned to handle his medium. The brush strokes are long and streaky. The shadows around the nose are a repellent greenish purple, and the highlight on the bridge was placed too far to one side. The highlights in the hair were applied while the underlying brown layer was still wet so that instead of gleaming curls he produced dull gray smudges. In addition, textural differentiation is noticeably lacking. The texture of the rock is the same as the skin, which is the same as the satin and the grass and the pearls. The anatomy is laughable: There is no sense of underlying structure. The arms and neck are the inflated tubes so typical of provincial portraiture. The left earlobe is missing, and the little finger on the left hand is disturbingly disjointed. Light too appears to have given Copley trouble. It seems, in general, to fall from the upper left, but the shadows are not consistently applied. And the light-dark contrasts are

Concrete details support the paragraph's opening assertion

rather too sharp, probably due to an overreliance on the mezzotint source.

Transition ("Despite its faults") and statement of idea that unifies the paragraph

Despite its faults, however, the painting still represents a remarkable achievement for a boy of fifteen. In the crisp linearity of the design, the sense of weight and bulk of the figure, the hint of a psychological presence, and especially in the rich vibrant color, Copley has already rivaled and even surpassed the colonial painters of the previous generation.

Transition ("about seventeen years later") and reassertion of central thesis

In *Mrs. Ezekial Goldthwait,* about seventeen years later and about four years before Copley went to England, all the early ineptness had disappeared. Copley has arrived at a style that is both uniquely his own and uniquely American; and in this style he achieves a level of quality comparable to any of his English contemporaries.

Brief description of the second picture

The substantial form of Mrs. Goldthwait dominates the canvas. She is seated at a round tilt-top table, one hand extended over a tempting plate of apples, oranges, and pears. A huge column rises in the right-hand corner to fill the void.

Biography and (in rest of paragraph) its relevance to the work

The fifty-seven-year-old Mrs. Goldthwait, wife of a wealthy Boston merchant, was the mother of fourteen children; she was also a gardener noted for her elaborate plantings.[3] Copley uses this fertility theme as a unifying element in his composition. All the forms are plump and heavy, like Mrs. Goldthwait herself. The ripe, succulent fruit, the heavy, rotund mass of the column, the round top of the table—all are suggestive of the fecundity of the sitter.

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[3]Prown, 76.

The most obvious characteristic of the work

The painting is also marked by a painstaking realism. Each detail has been carefully and accurately rendered, from the wart on her forehead to the wood grain of the tabletop to the lustrous gleam of the pearl necklace. As a painter of fabrics Copley surpasses all his contemporaries. The sheen of the satin, the rough, crinkly surface of the black lace, the smooth, translucent material of the cuffs—all are exquisitely rendered.

"But" is transitional, taking us from the obvious (clothing) to the less obvious (character)

But the figure is more than a mannequin modeling a delicious dress. She has weight and bulk, which make her physical presence undeniable. Her face radiates intelligence, and her open, friendly personality is suggested by the slight smile at the corner of her lips and by her warm, candid gaze.

Brief reminder of the first work, to clarify our understanding of the second work

The rubbery limbs of Copley's early period have been replaced by a more carefully studied anatomy (not completely convincing, but still a remarkable achievement given that he was unable to dissect or to draw from nude models). There is some sense for the underlying armature of bone and muscle, especially in the forehead and hands. And in her right hand it is even possible to see the veins running under her skin.

Further comparison, again with emphasis on the second work

Light is also treated with far greater sophistication. The chiaroscuro is so strong and rich that it calls to mind Caravaggio's *tenebroso*. The light falls almost like a spotlight onto the face of Mrs. Goldthwait, drawing her forward from the deep shadows of the background, thereby enhancing the sense of a psychological presence.

Reassertion of the thesis, supported by concrete details

Copley's early promise as a colorist is fulfilled in mature works such as *Mrs. Goldthwait*. The rich, warm red-brown tones of the satin, the wood, and the column

dominate the composition. But the painting is enlivened by a splash of color on either side—on the left by Copley's favorite aqua in the brocade of the chair, and on the right by the red and green punctuation marks of the fruit. The bright white of the cap, set off against the black background, draws attention to the face, while the white of the sleeves performs the same function for the hands.

Summary, but not mere rehash; new details

Color, light, form, and line all work together to produce a pleasing composition. It is pleasing, above all, for the qualities that distinguish it from contemporary English works: for its insistence on fidelity to fact, for its forthright realism, for the lovingly delineated textures, for the crisp clarity of every line, for Mrs. Goldthwait's charming wart and her friendly double chin, for the very materialism that marks this painting as emerging from our pragmatic mercantile society. In these attributes lie the greatness of the American Copleys.

Further summary, again heightening the thesis

Not that I want to say that Copley never produced a decent painting once he arrived in England. He did. But what distinguishes the best of his English works (see, for example *Mrs. John Montressor* and *Mrs. Daniel Denison Rogers*)[4] is not the facile, flowery brushwork or the fluttery drapery (which he picked up from current English practice) but the very qualities that also mark the best of his American works—the realism, the sense of personality, the almost touchable textures of the fabrics, and the direct way in which the sitter's gaze engages the viewer. Copley was a fine, competent painter in England, but it was not the trip to England that made him great.

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[4]Prown, plates.

[NEW PAGE]

Works Cited

Prown, Jules David. *John Singleton Copley*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966.

Sellers, Charles Coleman. "Mezzotint Prototypes of Colonial Portraiture: A Survey Based on the Research of Waldon Phoenix Belknap, Jr." *Art Quarterly* 20 (1957): 407–68.

✔ Checklist for Writing a Comparison

Have I asked myself the following questions?

- ❑ Is the point of the comparison clear? (Examples: to show that although *X* and *Y* superficially resemble each other, they are significantly different; or, to show that *X* is better than *Y*; or, to illuminate *X* by briefly comparing it to *Y*.) Phrases like "Despite these differences" and "A less conspicuous but still significant resemblance" are signs that critical thinking is at work, that a point is being made.
- ❑ Are all significant similarities and differences covered?
- ❑ Is the organization clear? If the chief organizational device is lumping, does the second half of the essay connect closely enough with the first so that the essay does not divide into two essays? If the chief organizational device is splitting, does the essay avoid the Ping-Pong effect? Given the topic and the thesis, is it the best organization?
- ❑ If a value judgment is offered, is it supported by evidence?