

CHAPTER 14

Definition

From time to time, you may have found yourself in a shouting match with friends over a question such as, "Which is the all-time great concert group—the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Queen, or Pink Floyd? Eventually, some wise soul says, "Hey, wait a minute. What's your idea of a great concert group?" The speaker has demanded a **definition** of the term that has sparked the debate. You may find that one person's standard for "great" is how many albums the group sold. Another may appreciate how the group subtly improvises on a theme. And another may insist that "great" means having long-lasting effect on music worldwide. Then you realize, perhaps, that you can't have a discussion or that, once you understand each other's terms, you have no real disagreement.

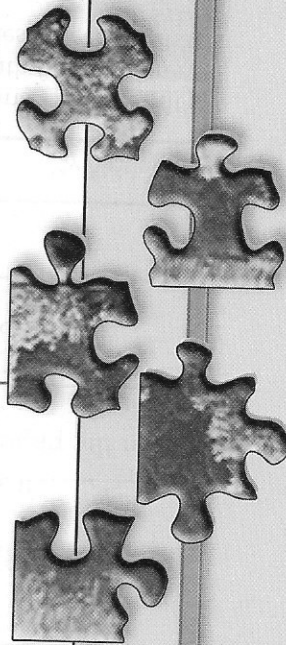
When writing, you won't have the advantage of another person's asking what you mean. If you want to appear reasonable when you present an idea, you sometimes have to define terms.

Often, a dictionary won't be much help. It may be a good place to start, but at times a dictionary definition won't explain a term fully. Take that word *great*, for example. A dictionary tells you that it means "remarkable or outstanding in magnitude, degree, or extent," and so it does; but how does such a definition help you distinguish between one rock group and another? To do so, you could begin with a dictionary definition, to be sure, but you must let your reader know what you believe the positive or desirable qualities of a rock group are. You must provide an **extended definition**.

As you have no doubt learned on your own, much of your course work—in psychology, history, sociology, biology, and so on—depends on extended definitions. So you know that certain terms, then, require a more elaborate definition than a dictionary gives. The burden is on the writer to explain the meaning of the term. Sometimes in a long paper you have to write an extended definition that may take up one or two paragraphs. Occasionally, a definition can become the paper itself.

In this chapter you will

- identify the strategies for writing a definition paper
- identify a topic and write your own definition paper
- analyze student formal and informal definition essays
- explore definition writing from the world around you
- analyze definition writing by professionals



The following kinds of terms often need defining.

Words and Terms for Definition

- *Judgmental words*—words that reflect opinions—need definition. Whether subjects being discussed are *good, better, best; bad, worse, worst; beautiful, ugly; friendly, unfriendly; wise, foolish; fair, unfair*; and so on, is a matter of opinion.
- *Specialized terms*—terms with a special meaning to a given group—need definition. Almost every professional or occupational group uses terms that the members of the group understand but that require explanation for those outside the group—for example, *psychosis*, a psychological term; *neoclassicism*, a literary term; *writ*, a legal term; and *gig*, a show-business term.
- *Abstractions*—general words like *love, democracy, justice, freedom, and quality*—need definition.
- *Controversial terms* like *male chauvinist, Obamacare, fracking, nuclear buildup, and affirmative action* need definition.
- *Slang terms* like *bro, phat, cool, the 'hood, bling, and hot* may need definition for many audiences.

Writing Your Definition Paper

You can present your extended definition in one of two ways—formally or informally.

Beginning a Formal Definition

A **formal definition** contains the three parts of a dictionary definition: (1) the term itself—the word or phrase to be defined; (2) the class—the large group to which the object or concept belongs; and (3) the differentiation—those characteristics that distinguish it from all others in its class.

TERM	CLASS	DIFFERENTIATION
A garden	is a small plot of land	used for the cultivation of flowers, vegetables, or fruits.
Beer	is a fermented alcoholic beverage	brewed from malt and flavored with hops.
Lunch	is a meal	eaten at midday.

To write an extended formal definition, you first need to develop a one-sentence definition of the term. Keep the following cautions in mind.

TIPS Writing One-Sentence Definitions



- **Make sure to include the class.** Don't write, "Baseball is when nine players . . ." Write instead, "Baseball is a *sport* in which nine players . . ."
- **Restrict the class.** Speak of a sonnet not as a kind of literature but as a kind of poem.
- **Include no important part of the term itself or its derivatives in the class or differentiation.** Don't say that "a definition is that which defines."
- **Make certain that the sentence defines and does not simply make a statement about the term.** "Happiness is a Madonna concert" doesn't have the essential parts of a definition of happiness.

- **Provide adequate differentiation to clarify the meaning.** Don't define a traitor as "one who opposes the best interests of his or her country." That definition doesn't exclude the well-meaning person who misunderstands the country's best interests and opposes from ignorance. Try instead, "A traitor is one who opposes the best interests of his or her country with malicious intent."

- **Don't make the definition too restrictive.** Don't define a matinee as "a drama presented during the day." That definition doesn't include other forms of entertainment, such as ballets or concerts, which also could be held in daytime.

EXERCISE

Using a dictionary whenever necessary, write one-sentence formal definitions for the following terms.

1. Politics
2. Joy
3. Intelligent design
4. Philosophy
5. Democracy
6. Terrorist
7. Cold fusion
8. Diversity
9. Hanukkah
10. Inflation
11. Chivalry
12. Marriage
13. Fear
14. Love
15. Compromise
16. Solar power
17. Loyalty
18. Social network
19. Partying
20. Lacrosse

Drafting Your Formal Definition Paper

Once you have composed a one-sentence formal definition, its three parts can become the major divisions of your paper. Your introduction might contain the term and its one-sentence definition. That sentence could become the thesis for your paper. Or, in addition to providing a one-sentence definition, you could also express an attitude toward the term or set it in a broader context. In her student paper later on in this chapter, Harriet Lim mentions briefly the range of apologies offered by offending people before she presents her one-sentence definition of *amnesty*, a special form of apology.

The next division of your paper could discuss the class, and the final division, the differentiation. In these discussions, you can make your idea clear by using specific details, by making comparisons and using analogies, by giving examples or telling anecdotes, and sometimes by tracing the history of the term. Often you will be able to quote or refer to the definitions others have given the term. This technique is particularly useful if experts disagree over the meaning of the term. An especially effective tool is *exclusion*, showing what the term is *not*:

Gourmet cooking does not mean to me the preparation of food with expensive wines; it does not mean the preparation of exotic dishes like octopus or rattlesnake; it does not mean the smothering of meat with highly caloric sauces. *Gourmet* cooking to me means the preparation of any food—whether black-eyed peas or hollandaise sauce—in such a way that the dish will be as tasty and attractive as it can be made.

In advancing your discussion of class and differentiation, you can use any rhetorical method or combination of methods of development you have studied. In fact, what makes definition such an interesting rhetorical challenge is that you can draw on most of the familiar patterns of essay development. For example, suppose you wanted to define the term *happiness*. You could use a variety of approaches, as indicated here.

Approaches to a Definition Essay on the Topic of Happiness

Possible approach	Mode of development
Provide accurate sensory details to describe the face and actions of a happy person you know.	Description (Chapter 7)
Tell a story about a moment when you were truly happy.	Narration (Chapter 8)
Provide several illustrations (examples) of happiness.	Example (Chapter 9)

Possible approach	Mode of development
Explain how to be happy or unhappy.	Process (Chapter 10)
Compare one state of happiness with another; contrast happiness with sadness.	Comparison-contrast (Chapter 11)
Divide happy people into groups or categories.	Classification (Chapter 12)
Explain the conditions necessary for true happiness or the outcomes of happiness in a person's life.	Cause and effect (Chapter 13)
Argue that happiness is not achievable in America today.	Argumentation (Chapter 15)

As we've pointed out, formal definitions play an important part in the exploration of subject matter in your courses. Your instructor in biology might ask you to define *budding*; your sociology instructor, *multiculturalism*; your literature instructor, *sonnet*. Whatever the challenge, you should treat the assignment as a formal definition, starting with a one-sentence designation and then explaining the class and differentiation of the term.

Writing an Informal Definition Paper

Although many terms lend themselves to the three-part formal definition, some are better explained by **informal definition**. What is a good teacher, for example? Or a bad marriage? Or an ideal home? Clearly, one can define such topics only in a subjective or personal way; your purpose is to show what the term means to you. In such instances, it is probably wise to avoid a rigid formal definition. Make your conception of the term clear by describing the subject as fully as you can. By the time readers finish the paper, they should understand what the term means to you.

As with formal definitions, you can use any method or combination of methods of development that you have studied to create an informal definition. Examples and anecdotes are especially good for explaining a term. So are comparison, process, classification, and cause and effect. The idea is to use whatever techniques come in handy to put the idea across.

ASSIGNMENT: DEFINITION

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Write an extended definition (formal or informal according to your instructor's directions) of a word, phrase, or concept that you believe requires explanation beyond its denotative meaning. If you write a formal definition, use a

one-sentence formal definition as a starting point. If you write an informal definition, choose a term of significant personal meaning to you. Use the tips given in the previous pages and the student models later on in this chapter as guides. Consider these words and terms as possible topics for your extended definition paper. Do library or online research, as needed.

- | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Evolution | 11. Success |
| 2. Happiness | 12. Political correctness |
| 3. Homelessness | 13. Depression |
| 4. Affirmative action | 14. Hope |
| 5. Shopping malls | 15. Virus |
| 6. Laziness | 16. Friends |
| 7. Wealth | 17. White-collar crime |
| 8. Leadership | 18. America |
| 9. Astrology | 19. "Wannabes" |
| 10. Religion | 20. Fun |

Student Writing: Formal Definition

MyWritingLab

Harriet Lim

Amnesty

The offenses committed against the public in our time are numerous, and they lead to requests for forgiveness and promises to act more in line with society's expectations. From athletes to politicians, pleas for forgiveness are familiar requests made to a suspicious public. One formal kind of forgiveness provided by a state is *amnesty*, which is a type of pardon granted for offenses against a government.

Amnesty is a kind of pardon, not a complete pardon. A pardon forgives a person convicted of a crime, "thus removing any remaining penalties or punishments and preventing any new prosecution" (Hill and Hill, "Amnesty") for the original crime. With a pardon, it's as if the crime never existed. Often pardons go to older people serving prison time or people for whom there is some doubt that a fair trial took place. Usually, a governor or president uses executive power to grant a pardon. The best known pardon is probably the one given by President Gerald Ford to ex-President

1

2

Student Writing: Informal Definition

MyWritingLab

In the following paper, note how the writer brings fresh insights to the word *success*.

Odette-Marie Shamen Beyond Wealth and Prosperity

In "Success is counted sweetest," the poet Emily Dickinson wrote "Success is counted sweetest / By those who ne'er succeed" (lines 1-2), and I understood exactly what she meant when I first arrived in the United States. With anxiety about my new life and not much past success in my home country, I made up my mind then that I would strive to be successful. What exactly do I mean by success now after my few years here? Success is not a big bank account; it is positive achievements that reflect a person's true character and that can set an example for others.

I'm not like many people who view success as financial prosperity. These people dream of a suburban home with a big lawn, a shiny sports utility vehicle, a wardrobe of designer dresses, and gold bracelets and earrings. Men and women work many hours for money to build a lifestyle based on material goals. Because they are so committed to their aim of monetary success, their desire becomes an unquenchable thirst. They spend barely any time with their children at breakfast; and when mommy or daddy drags through the door at night, the kids are already asleep. The men and women who work mainly for money don't enjoy dinnertime or fall weekend drives with the family. They miss their children's school plays or Halloween costumes year after year because they're away a lot. No matter how much their bank accounts show, they are missing the essential ingredients of success.

To me success means more than money and property. It means setting goals, sticking to them, and achieving the goals despite obstacles, all the time keeping family in mind. Sure, I want to live comfortably, but being truly happy with my life is most important as a measure of success to me. As an immigrant who had to start a new life in a new country, I had to make a plan to be successful here. I chose to go to college, which is a major key to success and one of the most exciting and rewarding journeys of life. I struggled to enter college, and I'm struggling with tough course work, but staying with it is true success for me. I am a nursing major, and the course is hard. Sometimes I feel tired and discouraged, but I push myself because I am determined to finish my degree. Finally, after two or more years I will be

1

Clearly stated thesis: what success is and what it is not.

2

Specific details flesh out examples.

3

Writer's personal definition of success begins here.

Direct quote lends authority to assertion.

Introduction engages reader's attention.

Transition refers back to the thesis; first sentence states topic of the paragraph.

Strong closing sentence for first paragraph.

Transition to next word "success" keeps focus on topic.

Richard Nixon after the Watergate scandal in the 1970s. Other pardons were those by President Clinton for Patty Hearst, who helped the Symbionese Liberation Army rob banks and commit other crimes. Hearst claimed that she was brainwashed. President Franklin Roosevelt "pardoned 3,687 people during his twelve years in office" ("Pardons"), more than any other president. Pardons are important because they return many rights, including voting rights, to the accused or convicted.

Amnesty, despite what some believe, is not really a pardon. In a pardon, the crime is forgiven. Amnesty merely allows "a reason to overlook or forget the offenses" (Hill and Hill, "Pardon"). History has recorded some noteworthy amnesties. President Andrew Johnson in 1865 proclaimed amnesty to the South after the Civil War. President Jimmy Carter granted amnesty to some who violated the call to register and serve in the Viet Nam War. Amnesty International is an organization that seeks to prevent and end human rights abuses and to seek justice for those whose individual rights are violated. Both pardon and amnesty, despite their differences, allow for a provision to correct errors in the legal system. Despite abuses, one must agree that amnesty is another feature to praise in a democratic government.

Works Cited

- Hill, Gerald, and Kathleen Hill. "Amnesty." *The People's Law Dictionary*, Fine, 2009. Law.com, dictionary.law.com/Default.aspx?selected=2401.
- . "Pardon." *The People's Law Dictionary*, Fine, 2009. Law.com, dictionary.law.com/Default.aspx?selected=1443.
- "Pardons." *Crime Library. Crime Museum*, www.crimemuseum.org/crime-library/pardons.

FOR WRITING OR DISCUSSION

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1. What is the writer's thesis?
2. What, according to the writer, is the difference between *pardon* and *amnesty*?
3. Which rhetorical strategies has the writer drawn on to develop her definition?
4. What is your view of the conclusion to the essay?
5. Write your own definition for some political or governmental term, such as *bipartisan*, *equal rights*, or *freedom*, or for another similar word or phrase.

able to help support my family and accomplish my greatest dream—to be

there for them always.

To me, determination is a big part of success. I'm sticking with my plan no

matter what. In describing the incredible success of Steve Jobs (the founder

of Apple Computers and Pixar, the company that made all the *Toy Story* mov-

ies), Jobs's Pixar cofounder Edmund Catmull said, "You need a stubborn-

ness, tenacity, belief and patience to stay the course" (qtd. in Markoff A32). It

took four years, when Pixar was really struggling, to make the first *Toy Story*.

But Jobs never gave up. I don't intend to give up either.

My determination to accomplish my goals does not prevent my attention

to my family. I make time for them, and watching my children grow under my

supervision is a measure of success to me. I'm home in the afternoons and

evenings, for example, when my son Emmanuel struggles with an arithmetic

problem or a word to spell, I am there to help him and my daughter Mollita

with their homework.

I also want to be an example to them. I want to share with them and

others the path I followed to become successful by keeping family values

despite hard work and long hours and not making money and other mate-

rial advantages my measure of success. We eat meals together. We go to

church together. Mollita, my seven-year-old, said to me a while back when

I helped her under the warm covers of her bed, "I want to be just like you

Mommy when I grow up." Hearing that, I know that I have reached some

success. Emily Dickinson was only partly right; once you achieve your own

personal definition of success you can still count it as sweet.

Works Cited

Dickinson, Emily. "Success is counted sweetest." *Selected Poems of Emily*

Dickinson, Modern Library, 2000.

Markoff, John. "Steven P. Jobs, 1955-2011: Redefined the Digital Age as the

Visionary of Apple." *The New York Times*, 6 Oct. 2011, p. A1+.

FOR WRITING OR DISCUSSION

MyWritingLab

1. What is the writer's thesis? What, according to the writer, is *not* success?

2. How does the introduction build to the thesis?

3. What do the references to Emily Dickinson add to the essay?

4. How does the first sentence in paragraph 2 serve as a transition? In

paragraph 3? In paragraph 4?

5. What do the citations contribute to the piece?

Works cited listings.

Another feature of definition.

6

5

4

Strong final sentence concludes the essay; return to quotation introduction very effective

Direct quotation enlivens essay

Naming of children personalizes example.

Last sentence closes paragraph effectively.

Definition in the World Around You

MyWritingLab

The language of law and commerce depends on a certain uniformity of definitions so that we have a common, understandable vocabulary. Examine any legal document and you will find it filled with definitions so that the signatories share familiar meanings. In the government agency Web site shown on the next page, note the effort of the Census Bureau to define a key word *poverty*, which has dramatic implications for taxes, funding, and social legislation.

Thesis — The Census Bureau defines poverty as a function of money income.

Definition — The last paragraph of the introduction uses the word *definition* and points out the elements used in the Bureau's definition of poverty. Note the flexibility in the definition in order for it not to be too restrictive: "Many government aid programs use a different poverty measure. . . ."

Audience and purpose — Anyone seeking to understand an official definition of poverty from the Census Bureau would find it here in relatively simple language. Public assistance policy, laws, housing requirements, taxation—all these elements rely on an agreed-upon definition, and the Census Bureau's is often used as a standard.

Details — The site identifies the specific details that make up the definition, including income used to compute poverty status and measure of need. You also see when the original poverty thresholds came into play.

Your Turn

Go online to find a definition of an important term, such as *democracy*, *addiction*, *wealth*, *fitness*, *depression*, or some such word or phrase. Then, write a definition of the word, drawing on the information you found at whatever sites you consulted. You might want to compare definitions or assert the superiority of one definition over the other according to your way of thinking.

STRATEGY CHECKLIST: Writing and Revising Your Definition Paper

<p><input type="checkbox"/> Have I selected a word or phrase that lends itself to an extended definition?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Is the word I've chosen too broad or too narrow, and how can I correct either of these two limitations?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Have I used one of the prewriting strategies to stimulate my thoughts?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Have I identified details and examples that support my understanding of the word?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Have I paid attention to peer comments about my prewriting?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Have I considered my audience and purpose?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Have I considered using an outline to plan my presentation?</p>	<p>Plan the paper.</p>
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<p><input type="checkbox"/> Have I written a thesis that expresses an opinion about the word I am defining?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> For an extended formal definition, have I included a one-sentence definition with three major parts?</p> <p> ■ Term</p> <p> ■ Class</p> <p> ■ Differentiation</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Have I written an introduction that states the term and provides some idea of why I'm choosing to define it?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Have I considered appropriate strategies to advance my definition?</p> <p> ■ Description</p> <p> ■ Narration</p> <p> ■ Example</p> <p> ■ Process</p> <p> ■ Cause and effect</p> <p> ■ Classification and division</p> <p> ■ Comparison and contrast</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Have I presented distinctive characteristics of the word in the body paragraphs?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Does my conclusion revisit the word or phrase, set a new context, or suggest that the reader take some action?</p>	<p>Write a first draft.</p>
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Revise and edit the paper.

- Do the characteristics I've identified suit the word I'm defining?
- Should I add or remove some examples?
- Is my definition complete?
- Will readers understand my meaning of the word as opposed to meanings held by others?

Proofread the paper.

- Have I proofread for grammar, spelling, and mechanics?

CROSSCURRENTS

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David Owen in "The Perfect Job" in this chapter and Nick Fiscina in "Dad's Disappointment" (see Chapter 7) characterize work experiences from completely different perspectives. Write an essay in which you determine the definition of *job* or *work* advocated by the writers and compare and contrast their points of view.

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Once you decide on a topic, do prewriting before you draft your definition essay. Come to class with your prewriting efforts and form groups of three to examine the work of each student in the group. Has each writer selected a term rich in meaning? What suggestions can you make about how to develop the thesis? Which patterns of essay development do you think will help each writer best define the word of choice? Where do you think the writer needs to provide details? Is the writer's intended purpose clear? What audience should the essay aim for, in your opinion?

When you produce the draft of your essay, take into account the comments you received from group members.

MyWritingLab

Visit Ch. 14 Definition in MyWritingLab to test your understanding of the chapter objectives.
