

The Definition Essay

def-i-ni-tion (def' e-nish' en) n. **1.** The act of defining a word, phrase, or term. **2.** The act of making clear and distinct. **3.** A determining of outline, extent, or limits.

Consider the following guidelines as you write your definition essay:

- Make your essay personal, amusing, vigorous, stimulating, memorable.
- Choose a generic topic rather than a specific topic. For example, write about churches but not Westminster Abbey.

What is it?

Definition is the explanation of a word. It answers the question: “What does it mean?”

Definitions come in two types. A **formal definition** is a short **definition** that states the meaning of a word in one or two sentences (dictionary definition). This type is used for explaining words that might be unfamiliar to the reader (“utilitarianism”), or for giving a particular meaning to a general term (“Wilderness is a state of mind as well as a place.”). An **extended definition** is a long **definition** in which the word refers to a complicated idea, thing or phenomenon. In this case, defining the word may be the subject of the entire **essay** (“What is Freedom?”).

Why? What is the purpose?

Definitions enable a shared understanding of technical terms or key concepts between writer and reader. Formal definitions are for explaining key terms or technical words in a composition.

Extended definitions are for: (1) exploring abstract concepts that might mean different things to different people, i.e. “love”; (2) explaining technical or theoretical terms that are complex, i.e. “metafiction”; and, (3) clarifying the way in which a word has changed in meaning over the years, i.e. “gay.”

When is definition required?

Formal definitions are often required:

When the term is obscure or not likely to be known by the reader. When a precise, shared understanding of the term is necessary to the discipline.

Extended definitions are often required:

When the word is often misunderstood. When the word is abstract and thus subject to philosophical inquiry. When a new or enhanced meaning of the word is being proposed or argued for.

Philosophy: What is “evil,” according to Kantian ethics?

Visual Arts: How do the paintings of Georgia O’Keefe express elements of abstraction? Even as they are representational?

Psychology: Discuss problems in the diagnosis and treatment of narcissism.

Management: What is stewardship?

Geography: Evaluate the arguments for and against the greenhouse effect.

Choosing a Definition

Choosing a definition is a key step in writing a definition essay. You need to understand the term before you can define it for others. Read the dictionary, but don't just copy the definition. Explain the term briefly in your own words. Also, it's important to limit your term before you start defining it. For example, you could write forever on the term "love." To limit it, you would write about either "romantic love," "platonic love," or "first love."

Types of Definitions Traditionally Used in Definition Essays

Any combination of these traditional types of definitions can help clarify meaning for the reader of your definition essay:

- **Analysis:** Divide the subject into parts and define each part separately.
- **Classification:** According to dictionary definitions, what classes does the subject belong to?
- **Comparison:** The unfamiliar may be defined by showing its likeness to the familiar or its difference from it.
- **Details:** What are the physical characteristics, traditional thoughts, and other distinguishing attributes that describe the subject of the paper?
- **Examples and Incidents:** Narrate illustrations that can clarify a group, theory, or object.
- **Negation:** Mention what it is not in order to clear the ground for what it is.
- **Origins and Causes:** Where did the subject come from? What is the background information? What is the history of the subject?
- **Results, Effects, and Uses:** Discuss the consequences and uses of the subject.
- **Process Analysis:** Explain how it works or functions.

Thesis Statement of a Definition Essay

The thesis statement usually identifies the term being defined and provides a brief, basic definition.

(term) (basic definition)

Ex: *Assertiveness is standing up for your rights.*

How To Write an Effective Definition

1. Create a definition. There are several ways to define a term. Here are a few options.
 - Define by function. Explain what something does or how something works.
 - Define by structure. Tell how something is organized or put together.
 - Define by analysis. Compare the term to other members of its class and then illustrate the differences. These differences are special characteristics that make the term stand out. For example, compare a Siberian husky to other dogs, such as lap dogs, mutts, or sporting dogs.

(term) (precise definition)

Ex: *A Siberian husky is a dog reputed for its ability to tolerate cold, its distinctive features, and its keen strength and stamina.*

- Define by what the term does not mean. This distinction can sometimes clarify a definition and help a reader to better understand it. If you're defining the idea of "home," you could begin by suggesting that the old saying "There's no place like home" is silly because there are, in fact, many places like home — or you could insist that home is really not a place at all. The opportunity to define is an opportunity to exercise your poetic imagination, to show how most people's sense of something is faulty or inadequate and that there is a better understanding (yours!) to consider.

2. Use understandable facts, examples, or anecdotes. Select facts, examples, or anecdotes to fully explain your definition. Ask yourself, "Which examples will best help readers understand the term? What examples would most appeal to my readers? Will a brief story reveal the term's meaning?" Do not use any examples that will not support the definition. In selecting a topic to define, look for something that you can define within your own experience and that will allow your poetic imagination some room to play. It might be a big mistake for your English instructor to define reggae or rap music, but there are many students who could do a great job. If you try to define something that is beyond the comprehension of your paper or your own experience, the task will become overwhelming and get mired down in details or abstractions. You could write a book trying to define a concept such as conservatism or liberalism and you still wouldn't have said anything that more than two other people would agree with. Students would be wise to avoid abstract notions such as patriotism, beauty, justice, love, or being a good sport

Remember: A definition essay is writing that explains what a term means. When writing a definition essay, remember to tell readers what term is being defined, to present a clear and basic definition, and to use facts, examples, or anecdotes that readers will understand. On the other hand, it can be useful — even fun — to take a rather abstract notion and put a spin on it. There doesn't appear to be much point in defining a student, for example, but defining what we mean by a *good* student could be interesting. Push that definition to the limit to make a special point. A good student is not necessarily one that earns good grades or even one that does his or her best; a good student is one that makes the teacher feel like a good teacher. Or try defining a good teacher, a good parent, a good doctor, and a good lover. In any case, if you are going to define something that everyone else has some idea about, you will need to shed fresh, even surprising light upon your subject.

Definition:

Examples: A **definition essay** may try and define . . .

- * **the meaning of an abstract concept, like *love*;**
- * **the true meaning and importance of *honesty*;**
- * **how the meaning of *family* goes deeper than just your blood relatives.**

A **definition essay** attempts to define a specific term. It could try to pin down the meaning of a specific word, or define an abstract concept. The analysis goes deeper than a simple dictionary definition; it should attempt to explain *why* the term is defined as such. It could define the term directly, giving no information other than the explanation of the term. Or, it could imply the definition of the term, telling a story that requires the reader to infer the meaning.

Questions:

- **What is the term that the speaker is trying to define?**
- **Did someone teach her the meaning of the term, or did she really learn from her own experience?**

Is the term defined here presented with more complex reasoning than a dictionary definition?

Some rhetorical points about defining things:

- Avoid using the phrases "is where" and "is when" in your definition: "Total Quality Management is when management and labor agree to. . . ." "A computer virus is where"
- Avoid circular definitions (repeating the defined term within the predicate, the definition itself): "A computer virus is a virus that destroys or disrupts software"
- Avoid using a too narrow definition, one that would unduly limit the scope of your paper: "Reggae music is sung on the Caribbean island of Jamaica. . . ."

Points to Ponder:

- Are there any fresh ideas enlisted in this definition? How would you have defined this idea? Are there ideas similar to it that you could choose to define?
- There are allusions here: (1) to the musical *Damn Yankees!*, (2) to the Bible (the parable of the Good Samaritan), and (3) to a poem by Robert Frost. Do these allusions add anything to the essay or to your understanding of things? What if you didn't "get" the allusions?
- What techniques of development does the essay use in the process of definition? Do you think the writer dwelt too long on what a Yankee is *not* before moving on to what a Yankee *is*?

Can you point to one sentence that functions as thesis statement in this essay?

Sample Definition Essay

What is This Thing Called Love?

A wise man once said that love is a wonderful thing. Although this statement leaves sparse room for argument, it does little to define what love is beyond the vague realm of wonderful. It is my duty as a devout romantic to embark upon the seemingly difficult task of defining love by looking at the history, explaining what love is not, and examining the uses of love and the results of that usage.

(Origin and Causes)

The origin of the word is probably the most logical place to start. As with many words in the English language, love is a derivative of the Latin word "causemajoraprobemus" which means "You're miserable when you got it and miserable when you don't." The word was created to explain the biological phenomenon that existed when certain individuals came into contact with each other and either remained together or went about their lives separately. Regardless of the outcome, the relationship was usually characteristic of throat lumps, knotted stomachs, weak knees, temporary loss of language, sweaty palms, dizziness, sneezing, and occasional nausea. Belligerent insanity also resulted. History clearly illustrates this. Can we ever forget the face that launched a thousand ships? Federally expressing Van Gogh's ear? The construction of Le Tour Eiffel? All of these were results of love and love lost.

(Negation)

Star-crossed lovers have stated that love is not hand nor foot nor any part belonging to a man. Matrimonial ceremonies also claim that love is not jealous or boastful. Let it be stated here that love also is not a gourmet dish, a domesticated animal, or a latest trend. Love is not a strategic defense mechanism nor the best kept secret at the Pentagon. Love is not another seasoning to bottle and stick on the dust-lined shelves of the spice rack. Love is not to be confused with adhesive tape.

Instead, love is a great counterpart to late, evening thunder storms on hot July nights. Love goes well with cold pizza on picnic blankets. Love is cold, wet sand between bare toes. Love is a capitalistic sell-all for novels, Top-40 pop songs, summer movies, and greeting cards. In its simplest terms, love is a four-letter word. Much like other words of similar letter make up, when expressed it can evoke laughter, pleasure, pain, anger, and virtually any wave of reaction. Love also can be confused with feelings of indigestion and gas. Houses have been built, burned, and banished because of love.

The Real Meaning of Honesty

I think it was my mother who taught me the meaning of honesty. Not because she actually was honest, but because she lied all the time. She felt that the easiest way out of any given situation was generally the best way out. And, for her, that generally meant telling a "little white lie." As a young child I thought it was kind of cool. And, naturally, when I would come to her with a concern or question wondering what I should do, she generally advised me to lie.

"Mom, I told Theresa that I would go over to her house, but now I would rather go to Sue's house to play."

"Tell Theresa you're sick," she would advise. And generally I did. But I didn't seem blessed with her lack of conscience. On many painful occasions Theresa would find out that I really went to Sue's house without her. These occasions taught me that it is more painful to be caught in a lie than it is to tell the truth in the first place. I wondered how it was possible that my mother had never learned that lesson.

I started thinking of all the lies that I'd heard her tell. I remembered the time she told someone that her favorite restaurant had closed, because she didn't want to see them there anymore. Or the time she told Dad that she loved the lawn mower he gave her for her birthday. Or when she claimed that our phone lines had been down when she was trying to explain why she hadn't been in touch with a friend of hers for weeks. And what bothered me even more were all the times she had incorporated me into her lies. Like the time she told my guidance counselor that I had to miss school for exploratory surgery, when she really needed me to baby-sit. And it even started to bother me when someone would call for her and she would ask me to tell them that she wasn't there.

So, I started my own personal fight against her dishonesty. When I answered the phone and it was someone my mother didn't want to talk to, I said, "Louise, mom is here, but she doesn't want to talk to you." The first time I did it, I think she grounded me, but I refused to apologize. I told her that I had decided that it was wrong to lie. And the next time it happened I did the same thing. Finally, she approached me and said, "I agree that lying is not the best thing to do, but we need to find a way to be honest without being

rude." She admitted that her methods weren't right, and I admitted that mine were a bit too extreme.

Over the past few years, the two of us have worked together to be honest- and yet kind. Honesty should mean more than not lying. It should mean speaking the truth in kindness. Though I started by trying to teach my mom the *importance* of honesty, I ended up gaining a deeper understanding of the *meaning* of the term.

Extended Definition Assignment

Introduction to Assignment	Whenever someone is learning something new or is unsure about exactly what something is, they turn to definitions. Definitions are important because they clarify and describe information in such a way that readers can then act on that information confidently. In extended communication extended definitions are frequently used to help people solve problems and to communicate information to multiple audiences.
Assignment	Write and design a extended definition that is appropriate for a specific audience in a specific context
Assignment Details	In this assignment you will define something using multiple types of examples in your extended definition. You will write with a specific audience and context in mind. Once you choose the subject of your extended definition, you need to complete research in order to fully understand it. You must also cite the sources you use within the text and include a bibliography. You will create this document using a memo format.
Criteria for Assessing Assignment	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Does the extended definition contain three types of definitions?2. Is the extended definition rhetorically successful--Does it meet the needs of the audience(s) and the context in which it will be used?3. Is the style plain and simple?4. Is the definition accurate?5. Has the writer cited sources within the text and included a bibliography at the end?6. Is the definition free of grammatical and mechanical errors?7. If the definition uses visuals, and are they clearly designed?