

Chapter 11: The Definition Essay



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Define. Label. Interpret.

What words, concepts, or ideas do you associate with this picture? How would you define them?

Where might an artist paint a mural like this and for what purpose? What messages are being portrayed, transmitted, suggested by this image?

Besides the words, what concepts do the images project?

AND, how do you create a unique explanation in writing?

Why Write a Definition Essay?

When humans interact with one another, they depend on having a universal understanding of vocabulary; sometimes, people create new words to convey a complex emotion or to establish a new use of an old word. Slang terms and metaphors for everyday activities and objects have surfaced generation after generation, often confounding or just irritating our “elders” like “cool” from the 1950s or “awesome” from the 1980s. How many different ways can someone ask for “coffee?” Jargon is created within some professions, for example, in education, medical, or computer science fields. For this reason, new words are added every year to the Standard English Dictionary and to apps such as Urban Dictionary. At times it becomes necessary for a writer to clarify his or her terms within the context of an essay, and sometimes, a writer chooses to challenge a particular interpretation or application of a word which requires an entire essay devoted to the charge.

Consider some of these examples:

What is an “educated” person? Is “educated” the same as being “intelligent” or having a college degree? Does being “educated” entail more than that? A definition essay on this topic would argue for all of the distinguishing traits that could define being “educated.”

In election years, politicians, even within their own political parties, tend to be defined as “liberal” vs. “conservative” or “left-wing” vs. “right-wing.” But what do those terms really mean? Even within established political paradigms, political rivals and pundits on different news programs will disagree or describe these positions differently. A writer could write a definition essay to assert a particular way of viewing these complicated labels.

What is “leadership” in our world today? Does “leadership” imply that one must hold a political office or be the CEO of a corporation? Who else in our society qualifies as a leader? What is generally accepted as the defining or distinguishing characteristics of a leader?

Love, marriage, family—these concepts are not only abstract, but they are concepts that have been used to argue changes to interpretations of laws and civil rights. These are good examples of how definitions that were once generally accepted and unchallenged sometimes need clarified under a new lens.

Understanding Definition

Definition is important when writers need to clarify complex or abstract topics which often is necessary as part of an essay or even as an entire essay arguing for a shared understanding of a word or concept or sometimes to establish a new or uncommon understanding of a word.

Definition can be clarified with more advanced explorations of words and concepts that require names, categories, and a presentation of distinguishing traits.

- **Synonyms**—usually this approach is used for clarification as part of an essay and clarifies the intended definition by using words that are similar.
- **Essential Definitions**—names the word by defining it, applies a broad category, identifies limitations or traits that prevents the interpretation from being applied incorrectly.
- **Extended Definitions**—this type of definition requires a multi-paragraph, essay length development that usually involves other modes of development to support an assertion of an argued meaning.

Logical fallacies to avoid

- **Circular definition**—avoid using the word itself in the assertion of the definition.
- **Overly broad definition**—be careful to limit the definition so that it can’t be applied to unintended contexts.
- **Overly narrow definition**—also be careful to not be too limiting so that your definition does not restrict the applications from ideas that should be included.
- **Omission of main categories**—similar to being overly broad.
- **Prejudiced thinking/labeling**—be sensitive to how some audiences could be stereotyped or labeled negatively without clear justification.

The Thesis Statement

The definition thesis statement should not only provide the parameters of your proposed definition, but it should also establish why there is a need for establishing a shared understanding of your idea.

Examples

- While many people may believe that being educated requires formal schooling with degrees and certificates to prove achievement, being educated is also the result of learning independent of formal education: books read, journeys taken, and self-reflection.
- Although family once meant having two parents and siblings living in a house with a white picket fence, families today consist of myriad variations of this arrangement as long as love and support of one another are the critical boundaries.

Basic Structure

Unlike other essay modes, the definition essay is organized around the devices that you choose to use to develop your extended definition. For example, a writer could use a process approach. In another approach, a writer could use illustration or narration to demonstrate the real life contexts where the word is used. Cause and effect could be used to clarify what happens when the word is understood in your terms and contexts; similarly, the causes that lead to misinterpretation could be considered and demonstrated. Finally, using a comparison/contrast approach is a common section of most definition essays; sometimes this approach is called negation—with the author emphasizing what the word clearly does *not* mean, when it does *not* apply.

Introduction

One strategy for starting a definition essay is to mention circulating and conflicting definitions for the word or concept to be clarified in the essay. Another possibility is to take a historical approach. How has the word or concept been viewed in the past? If the focus of your essay will be arguing for a new slang word, then use examples of other slang words that have been introduced in previous generations. As a last resort, you can start with a short dictionary definition of the word, but this approach can be viewed as monotonous and boring to some audiences. Regardless of the approach that you choose, remember that it needs to lead to the thesis statement which is the clear assertion of how you want the word or concept to be understood.

Conclusion

To effectively write a conclusion for an extended definition essay, think about the impacts that adopting your established definition will have for the audience in situational contexts. Reiterate why your assertion is more apt than other perspectives, and be sure to summarize the distinguishing traits used to establish your definition as they were presented in the introduction.

No professional or sample student essays are available for this rhetorical strategy.

Tips for Writing the Definition Essay

The definition essay as a rhetorical mode demonstrates a writer's ability to present a particular view of new language or an analysis of society's evolving understanding of old concepts. The purpose can be either expository or argumentative, used as support for another essay mode, or an entire essay itself. Rather than applying the "tried and true" literal dictionary definition of a word or idea, an extended definition is often an argument for applying connotations and contexts that help clarify the complexities of greater social issues and establishing boundaries for shared understanding and appreciation for user-friendly terminology.

Topic Ideas

- Addict/addiction/alcoholic
- Patriotic/patriotism
- Dance as a sport
- An athlete
- Health/fitness
- Home
- Hero
- Vacation
- Family or marriage
- Extreme sports
- Hate crimes
- Education/educated
- political terms
- Field/discipline specific terms
- Parenting terms
- Organic
- Leadership

Chapter Questions for Comprehension

Be complete in your explanations and cite examples from the chapter if appropriate. Use complete sentences with proper grammar, spelling and punctuation.

1. When would a writer need to use definition approach?
2. What are three types of definition?
3. Explain the difference between concrete and abstract topics and concepts.