

Definition Theme

UWF Writing Lab

Definition is so fundamental to the activities of thinking and writing that we too often take its procedures for granted. That is, we may begin to overlook the rock-bottom significance of many of our most common words. In fact, as our educations become more formalized, we may tend to worry more about all the words we don't know than about the words we do know. We bone up on vocabulary lists so that we can pass tests that demonstrate our mastery of words like assuage, intimate, impervious, or plethora; yet what kind of test would examine our knowledge of such familiar words as friend, grief, honor, sex, violence, time, or love--words which comprise the emotional and intellectual contours of our lives?

We cannot assume that people will always interpret such words, no matter how ordinary they are, exactly as we expect them to. An everyday word such as time, for instance, may have radically different meanings and associations to a physicist, a terminally ill patient, a jazz musician, an Olympic runner, and a prisoner. In addition, what may be "violent" to some is a football game with number of rough plays, while to others a "violent" game is an exciting game. To a coach, it may well be a well-executed game.

Thus, definition is a fundamental way of organizing a paragraph and a basic part of communication. A definition says what something is and what it is not. A paragraph developed by definition, therefore, focuses on specifying the characteristics of the subject. It clarifies the meaning of any fuzzy or controversial term. You may enlarge on the dictionary meaning(s) of the word, or you may write about your thoughts, prejudice, or experiences associated with the word. Often, you can expand on the lexical definition of the word by using its etymology to clarify its meaning, giving examples, stating functions, or showing the effects of the defined term.

For the practical purpose of composition, we may consider several types of definition:

LEXICAL DEFINITION: The definition we find when we consult a dictionary is the simplest and most commonly used type of definition. It can be the means by which we learn a new word or clarify a familiar one. Lexical definitions are rarely cited in writing: when they are, it is to show that the writer believes there is a need to call attention to the way a word is commonly used. A lexical definition does not give us the complete meaning of a word. Instead, it gives us the word's accepted usage along with other basic information about the term. In order to write a good definition paragraph, we need to think beyond its dictionary synonyms and use the lexical meaning only for clarification. This is one reason why we should cite dictionary definitions rarely and why we should never begin a composition with "Webster defines X as..." when we intend our discussion to be a serious exploration into the meaning of X.

STIPULATIVE DEFINITION: We use this technique when we deliberately want to alter in some way the customary lexical sense of a word. We may want to give a word a new shading or a sharper interpretation. For example, we may decide that adult as defined by most dictionaries is too vague for our purposes, and so we make clear that in our theme we will use it in a more specific sense: anyone regardless of sex or mental competence who is eighteen or over. We are stipulating a definition when we want to focus on only one aspect of the word. If this technique is used, it is a good idea to retain enough of a word's customary lexical usage to ensure comprehensibility.

EXTENDED DEFINITION: This is a method of defining in greater detail. We usually reserve extended definition for words that are complex because of their abstract or emotional dimensions. Complex terms like fear and anxiety can be defined by using this technique. An extended definition expands and improves the common usage rather than contradicts it. It is a common feature of expository writing, and it is used most frequently. The writer, in using this method, would need to take the word beyond the minimal definition provided by a dictionary and discuss it within the wider context of our experience.

Most definitions, regardless of the method used, are concerned with current meanings--the usual meanings that people attach to words. The most common of these definitions are called denotative and connotative. Denotative definitions single out an object: it identifies the class to which the word belongs. For example, the word hero is “a man distinguished for exceptional courage” or “a sandwich.” In contrast, connotative definition present ideas and impressions, the emotional aura most or all of us associate with an object, an activity, or even a descriptive word. For instance, both inexpensive and cheap mean low in price, cheap usually carries the connotation of poor quality or of something contemptible. Inexpensive is an emotionally neutral word: cheap usually is not. The denotative value of a word is its primary dictionary definition, while a word’s connotative value includes the word’s entire range of public and private associations. Thus, a word like work has the denotative meaning of “exertion or effort”; and its connotative meanings would range from “work of art,” “work as a sub,” “the opposite of employment” to “a series of meaningless tasks” or “a rewarding career.”

The following words have several potentially interesting connotations and/or aspects or meanings. Choose one and use a definition method to develop it into a comprehensive and coherent paragraph.

bad	cold-blooded	gross	quality	token	death
bread	the establishment	heel	rap	time	your name
bum	fan	juice	skin	cool	turkey
ensorship	fantasy	loose	square	work	weird

Or choose a technical or specialized term associated with your vocation or a vocation. Or choose a college course and define it.

Or choose one of the following:

hypertension	fair play	hillbilly	logic	the American way of life
fear	justice	sense of humor	hypnosis	Southern hospitality
anxiety	success	practical joker	envy	fidelity
alienation	maturity	naïveté	jealousy	Holocaust
truth	adulthood	resume	liberty	senior citizen
adolescence	friendship	chauvinism	lobotomy	patriotism
lady	love	materialism	ESP	
chivalry	harmony	communism	sonic boom	
macho man	happiness	hemophiliac	humanitarianism	
fanaticism	hero	addiction	crime	
balk	villain	wit	retribution	
pinch hitter	autopsy	revenge	cosmopolitanism	
grunion run	virtue	minority	sophistication	