WR 222 Essay 2: Argument of Definition

Words used in the public realm often have slippery definitions that change with time. For example, terms like “feminist” and “elite” are used proudly by some but insultingly by others. Definitional arguments are particularly powerful in that they help us to recognize that classifications change over time and are the result of cultural, social, and political forces that may come and go. Definitions are not “natural” – societies and individuals create them.

**Proposal**: Due on Blackboard by midnight on Monday, 2/6

**Peer Review Draft**: Due in class on Friday, 2/17

**Final Portfolio\*:** Due in class on Wednesday, 2/22

\*peer draft, peer review sheet, rubric, final draft, rhetorical analysis, blue slips from Writing Center (if any)

**Steps:**

**Pick a term/symbol/image to define.** (See below for examples.)

Note: The term must be arguable. This means that you will be able to find credible sources that disagree with your definition. For example, arguing that “racism” should include racist comments directed toward Mexican-Americans does not meet the requirements for this assignment, because that is already the legal, commonly-held definition and there isn’t a rational counter argument.

**Research your term.**

Start with the dictionary (the *OED* is a great source). Then look at op-eds and reliable blogs. Use the Valley Library. Remember to look for sources that agree *and* disagree with you.

**Create your definition and start writing.**

Your paper should include:

* Awareness of a specific audience and **publication** for which you will be writing and consideration of how your identification of that audience informs your definitional argument
* A strong and engaging **introduction** that grabs the reader’s interest
* Clear **thesis** (claim and reason) involving a matter of definition
* General **definition** of key term that is acceptable to readers – do more than quote the dictionary
* Support/explanation/**defense of the terms** of the definition – why is this a good definition?
* Examination/**support of the claim** in terms of the definition (does the claim meet the criteria set out in the definition? compare/contrast claim and definition)
* Consideration of alternative views and **counterarguments**, such as any objections that a reader might have to claim, criteria, or evidence, or the way the definition is formulated (rebuttals)
* A conclusion of your argument that explains the **implications** of your definitional argument (so what? who cares?)
* Credible **sources**
* Ideas from at least 3 credible sources (no Wikipedia) must be incorporated into your essay
* Must be op-eds, credible blogs, or up to 1 dictionary
* Make sure to introduce the author/site and state why he/she/it is relevant to your argument
* In-text **citations** for every quote, fact, and reference
* Correct page length: 3-4 pages, double-spaced, Times New Roman, 12-point font
* Rhetorical analysis (in addition to 3-4 pages)

**Rhetorical Analysis**

* When you are finished writing your paper, you will do a write-up that explains some of your rhetorical strategies. Include answers to the following questions:
* Length: At least ½ a page, typed.

What publication did you pick and why? Who is the audience for this publication?

How did you tailor your essay so that it would match the publication’s style and expectations?

What methods of definition did you use (historical, analogy, etc.)? Why was this a good choice for you audience?

What went well for you in this essay? What was difficult?

**Examples of the different types of definitional arguments**

These are questions that could lead to definitional claims. For example, “Is rap poetry?” is not a thesis, but your answer to that question could become a thesis with a claim and a reason.

Questions related to genus:

* Is assisting in suicide a crime?
* Is NASCAR a sport?
* Is rap poetry?
* Does X fit into the genus Y? (Insert your own choice of topic here)

Questions related to species (a more specific category):

* Is marijuana a relatively harmless drug or a dangerous, addictive one?
* Is Saudi Arabia an ally or an opponent of the US?
* Is TV's "Survivor" a reality show or a game show?
* Is X a Y or a Z? (Again, insert your own choices here)

Questions related to conditions:

* Should a woman be held to the same physical requirements as a man in order to join the army?
* Should everyone pay the same percentage of their income in taxes, regardless what that income is?
* Are high scores on the SATs a fair condition for entrance into universities?
* Must X occur in order for Y? (Your own choices go here – see *EAR* pg. 258 for more examples)

Questions related to the fulfillment of conditions:

* Should "dead languages" like Greek and Latin count towards the foreign language requirement?
* Should academic scholarships count as taxable income?
* Should nontraditional educational experiences, such as semesters abroad and internships, count for college credit?
* Should X be counted as Y for the purposes of Z? (Your own choices here – see *EAR* pg. 258 for more examples)

Questions related to the membership in a named class:

* Is any writer today in a class with William Shakespeare, John Milton, Jane Austen, and/or John Steinbeck?
* Is any musician today in a class with Elvis, Bob Dylan, the Beatles, and/or Fleetwood Mac?
* Is any actor today in a class with Jimmy Stewart, Clark Gable, Katherine Hepburn, and/or Elizabeth Taylor?
* Is any recent president in a class with Washington, Lincoln, and/or Roosevelt?
* Does X deserve the status of Y? (Insert your own choices here)

Adapted from N. Kerns, Purdue University (2008)