

What Is a Definition Essay?

(Two web resources adapted for educational purposes at Olympiads School.)



Definition essay explained



- The definition essay explains the meaning of a word or a concept or a term. The purpose of the definition essay is to help the reader understand the meaning of an unfamiliar term or clarify the meaning of an abstract or vague term.

How to Write a Definition Essay



- The following are common ways to define a word or a concept or a term:

- 1. Demonstrate the denotations and connotations of a word:
 - Denotations are the formal dictionary definitions of a word.
 - Connotations often imply emotional, informal, or slang cases of the word.
- *Example 1*
 - Rat— Denotative meaning: a rodent;
 - Connotative meaning: a person who tattles on other people or who exhibits undesirable or dishonest behavior.
- *Example 2*
 - Card— Denotative meaning: a sturdy, but small, piece of rectangular shaped paper used for business purposes or card games.
 - Connotative meaning: a lively, entertaining person or the act of requiring proof of age before sales of alcoholic beverages and tobacco products.

2. Demonstrate the popular beliefs and personal interpretations of a concept:



- *Example 1*
 - Success— Popular belief: success means getting rich
 - Personal interpretation: success means either overcoming obstacles or other unique interpretations.
- *Example 2*
 - Beauty— Popular belief: good looking
 - Personal interpretation: self-sacrifice, loving, forgiving, or other unique interpretations.

3. Demonstrate the characteristics, the function, or the make-up of an object or a term:

- *Example 1*

- **Axe**— An axe is a tool used for chopping trees and splitting wood; it is made up of a wooden handle and a metal head with a blade usually on one side.

- *Example 2*

- **Machismo**— Machismo is the inflated male ego as characterized by domination of women, an exaggerated show of male strength, etc.

Introduction



- 1. **Lead-in:** Introduce the topic (the concept or term you are going to define).
- 2. **Transition:** Make transition to thesis statement.
- 3. **Thesis Statement:** Define at least three aspects of the meaning of the concept or term (e.g. "Country music can be best understood if we know its history, its pattern of rhythm, and its themes.").

Body



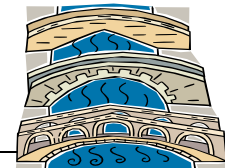
- **Paragraph 1**
- 1. **Topic Sentence:** Present the first aspect of the meaning of the concept or term (e.g. "The meaning of Country Music depends heavily on its history").
- 2. **Supporting Details:** Explain what/how/why.
- 3. **Closing Remarks:** Wrap up this paragraph (e.g. "That is why one can not understand Country Music without learning about its history").



- **Body Paragraph 2**
- 1. **Topic Sentence:** Present the second aspect of the meaning of the concept or term.
- 2. **Supporting Details:** Explain what/how/why.
- 3. **Closing Remarks:** Wrap up this paragraph.

- **Body Paragraph 3**
 - 1. **Topic Sentence:** Present the third aspect of the meaning of the concept or term.
 - 2. **Supporting Details:** Explain what/how/why.
 - 3. **Closing Remarks:** Wrap up this paragraph.
- Writing Made Easy

Conclusion



- 1. Wrap up the main points.
- 2. Point out the significance of the concept or term

Definition Essay

What is it?

A Definition Essay:

- Explains what a term means
- Sets the boundaries of a thing, concept, emotion or value
- Answers “what is it?” as well as “what is it not?”
- Specifies the main qualities and its essential nature

Kinds of Definitions

- Formal Definition
- Stipulative Definition
- Extended Definition

Formal Definition

- Usually gives the standard dictionary meaning or the specialized meaning agreed to by a particular group
- A statement of general class followed by the distinction between it and other members of the class.

Examples of Formal Definition

Term: submarine

General class: a seagoing vessel

Distinction: that operates underwater

Term: Insanity

General class: a mental condition

Distinction: in which a defendant does not know right from wrong

When to use formal definition

- It is most useful to use a formal definition to explain the basic or most commonly used meaning of a term in order for the reader to understand the rest of the discussion.
- A formal definition should only be used as a starting point.

Stipulative Definition

- Clarifies the **PARTICULAR WAY** that you are using a word

Stipulation Example

If you want to argue that PRIDE can ruin a relationship you might first stipulate a meaning of PRIDE that ties it with that purpose.

If you want to argue that LOVE is all you need, you might stipulate a particular kind of LOVE that you are discussing.

When to use stipulative definition

It is best to use a stipulative definition:

- when the concept you are discussing is broadly defined and used
- when you are using a term in a specific way

Extended Definition

- WHAT WE ARE DOING :)
- Used to explore a thing, quality or idea in its FULL COMPLEXITY
- Draws boundaries around it until its meaning is complete and precise
- Besides defining your purpose it may be used to:
 - Persuade readers to accept a definition
 - To explain
 - To amuse (only slightly please)

Examples of When to Use Extended Definition

- An ABSTRACT CONCEPT like *patriotism*
- A CONTROVERSIAL PHRASE like *"beginnings of life"*
- A COLLOQUIAL OR SLANG EXPRESSION like *hype*
- A THING like *microcomputer*
- A SCIENTIFIC IDEA like *natural selection*
- An EVERYDAY EXPRESSION like *nagging*

When to use Extended Definition

- Used when the subject is:
 - Complex
 - Vague
 - Laden with emotions or values
 - Misunderstood
 - Arguable

Note: Everyone must write an extended definition!

How do we do it?

Step 1: Choosing a Topic

- Words that have complex meanings
- Words that are open to varied interpretations
- Words that may be unfamiliar to readers
- Should be something that you know and care enough about to explore in great detail and surround completely

Step 2: Explore your Topic

- Examine and list some conventional meanings
 - Possibly consult an unabridged dictionary
- Examine differences of opinion regarding the word
 - The different ways wrong or right that you have seen or heard it used
 - Ask others what they think it means

Step 3: Strategies to Consider

- How can the subject be DESCRIBED?
- What are some EXAMPLES?
- Can the subject be DIVIDED into qualities or characteristics?
- Can its FUNCTIONS help define it?
- Will COMPARING AND CONTRASTING it with something else help sharpen its meaning?
- Do its CAUSES OR EFFECTS help clarify its sense?

Step 3_{cont}: Other Defining Strategies

- Synonyms: convey the range of the word's meaning(s)
- Negation: convey what the word does NOT mean and how this limits the meaning or focus
- Etymology: convey its buried or original meaning

Note

- *The previous strategies may be used separately or in combination to create the desired effect.*

Step 4: Select your Purpose

- Are you explaining an unfamiliar word?
- Are you expressing your own views so that readers see a familiar subject from a new angle?
- Are you arguing in favor of a particular definition?
- Are you persuading readers to look more closely at themselves or their surroundings?

Step 5: Formulate a Thesis

- Your thesis should include:
 - The word you are defining
 - The direction of your essay (may be implied)
 - Example: In my opinion, the term 'monster' does not refer to an individual of hideous appearance, but rather, the term 'monster' refers to one who partakes in immoral acts or decisions. Also, it is my goal to prove that truly we are all monsters.

Writing the Definition Essay

Step 1: Introduction

- Should explain why the definition is significant or necessary

Consider:

- Reporting the incident or event that made this definition relevant to you
- A quotation from another writer that supports or contradicts your definition
- Explaining what the word does NOT mean (negation)
- The etymology of the word (NOT the definition!)

DO NOT USE THE
DICTIONARY DEFINITION AS
THE BEGINNING OF YOUR
INTRODUCTION!

EX. “According to the *American Heritage Dictionary*.....”

Step 2: Body

- Should proceed paragraph by paragraph to REFINE the characteristics or qualities of the term being defined.
- Should include as many previously mentioned ‘defining strategies’ as necessary to adequately fulfill your purpose.

Step 2: Body Organization

You might:

- Move from general to specific
- Arrange your points in order of increasing importance
- Begin with a personal experience and show how your definition operates in your environment

Step 3: Conclusion

You might:

- Summarize your definition
- Indicate your definition's superiority to other definitions
- Quote another writer who supports your definition
- Recommend that readers make some use of the information that you have provided