

Persuasive Definitions

The purpose of a **persuasive definition** is to engender a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward what is denoted by the definiendum. This purpose is accomplished by assigning an emotionally charged or value-laden meaning to a word while making it appear that the word really has (or ought to have) that meaning in the language in which it is used. Thus, persuasive definitions amount to a certain synthesis of stipulative, lexical, and, possibly, theoretical definitions backed by the rhetorical motive to engender a certain attitude. As a result of this synthesis, a persuasive definition masquerades as an honest assignment of meaning to a term while condemning or blessing with approval the subject matter of the definiendum. Here are some examples of opposing pairs of persuasive definitions:

“Abortion” means the ruthless murdering of innocent human beings.

“Abortion” means a safe and established surgical procedure whereby a woman is relieved of an unwanted burden.

“Liberal” means a drippy-eyed do-gooder obsessed with giving away other people’s money.

“Liberal” means a genuine humanitarian committed to the goals of adequate housing and health care and of equal opportunity for all of our citizens.

“Capitalism” means the economic system in which individuals are afforded the God-given freedom to own property and conduct business as they choose.

“Capitalism” means the economic system in which humanity is sacrificed to the wanton quest for money, and mutual understanding and respect are replaced by alienation, greed, and selfishness.

“Taxation” means the procedure by means of which our commonwealth is preserved and sustained.

“Taxation” means the procedure used by bureaucrats to rip off the people who elected them.

The objective of a persuasive definition is to influence the attitudes of the reader or listener; thus, such definitions may be used with considerable effectiveness in political speeches and editorial columns. While persuasive definitions may, like lexical definitions, be evaluated as either true or false, the primary issue is neither truth nor falsity but the effectiveness of such definitions as instruments of persuasion.

Exercise 2.3

I. Determine whether the following definitions are stipulative, lexical, precisising, theoretical, or persuasive.

- ★1. “Blind” means, for federal income tax purposes, either the inability to see better than 20/200 in the better eye with glasses or having a field of vision of 20 degrees or less.

2. “Football” means a sport in which modern-day gladiators brutalize one another while trying to move a ridiculously shaped “ball” from one end of the playing field to the other.
3. “Glasstooth” means an electronic device worn like a pair of glasses that instantly flashes text messages to the recipient.
- ★4. “Diffident” means lacking confidence in oneself; characterized by modest reserve.
5. “Magnetism” means a property of certain substances such as iron, cobalt, and nickel that arises from the spin of the electrons in the unfilled inner shell of the atoms that compose the substance.
6. “Fiduciary” means having to do with a confidence or trust; a person who holds something in trust.
- ★7. “Politician” means a person of unquestioned honesty and integrity whom the people, in their collective wisdom, have duly elected to guide the ship of state and protect it from the reefs and shoals that threaten it on every side.
8. “Intoxicated,” for purposes of driving a car in many states, means having a blood-alcohol content of 0.1 percent (.001) or greater.
9. “Femikin” means a female manikin.
- ★10. “Sound” means a compression wave, in air or some other elastic medium, having a frequency ranging (for humans) from 20 to 20,000 vibrations per second.
11. “Radioactive area” means, for purposes of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, any area accessible to individuals in which there exists radiation at such levels that a major portion of the body could receive in any one hour a dose in excess of 5 millirems or in any five consecutive days a dose in excess of 100 millirems.
12. “Neurosis” means a chronic emotional disturbance that arises from suppressed or forgotten emotional stress (such as resentment, hostility, aggression, or guilt) experienced in early childhood.
- ★13. “Petrograb” means invading a country to steal its oil.
14. “Smoker” means a rude and disgusting individual who callously emits noxious tobacco fumes into the air, threatening the health and comfort of everyone in the vicinity.
15. “Diadem” means an ornamental headband worn as a badge of royalty; a crown.
- ★16. “Psychiatry” means the fortuitous melding of modern medicine with psychology that promises relief to thousands of poor, desperate souls who suffer the pains of emotional disorder.
17. “Gene” means the hereditary unit that occupies a fixed chromosomal locus, which through transcription has a specific effect on phenotype and which can mutate to various allelic forms.
18. “Ramster” means an animal produced by crossbreeding a rat with a hamster.
- ★19. “Intractable” means not easily governed; obstinate; unruly; not disposed to be taught.