

Writing Center

Definition Guidelines *

Biology, grammar, music, chemistry, engineering, computers, law, economics, drafting, and literature each as specialized fields has terminology that beginners must learn before they can fully understand the exact field. Changing world conditions regularly produce new terms, and we are constantly encountering in speech and in print, words and phrases that are new to us, or we are using older ones that have taken on new meanings.

Additionally, one of the most frequent and most serious obstacles to clear communication is the failure to define terms. Some conversations and writings are made incomprehensible by that failure. For example, in isolation, a phrase like “power to the people” can mean anything from revolution to better electric service.

Dictionary definitions work in two ways. First, a dictionary provides a definitive meaning, but it goes far beyond it and is best thought of as an extended definition. Second, a dictionary can, and in for many terms must, use the techniques of a formal definition; a term is placed in the class it belongs to and then is differentiated from all other members of the same class. Formal definitions follow a precise formula, as in the chart illustrates below.

FORMAL DEFINITIONS

Term	Class	Differentiating Characteristics
convertible	automobile	with a top that can be raised and lowered
widow	woman	whose husband has died
martini	cocktail	made with gin and dry vermouth
sonnet	poem	fourteen lines of iambic pentameter
owl	bird of prey	nocturnal habits; strong beak and talons

The resulting definitions would resemble these: A convertible is a car that can be raised and lowered. An owl is a bird of prey of nocturnal habits having a strong beak and talons.

Although dictionary definitions are often incorporated into extended definitions, definition papers should not usually discuss terms for which a dictionary alone would be sufficient. Some definition papers, in fact, may have as their central point the inadequacy, or impossibility, of good dictionary definitions. Skilled writers, however, almost always avoid starting off with phrases such as “According to the dictionary,” or “Webster says.”

Tips for Expressing Formal Definitions

1. **Avoid such faulty predications as “is when” and “is where.”** For example, don’t write “A vacation is when people don’t work,” or “A grocery store is where food is sold.” *Is*, being a linking verb, must be followed by the same type of construction that precedes it, and an adverb clause cannot serve as a predicate nominative/ subject complement. A noun must be defined with a noun, a verb with a verb, an adjective with an adjective: “To run is to move swiftly”; “Shiny means bright”; “A red herring is a false clue or distraction”; “A vacation is a period of time spent away from one’s normal workday routine”; “A grocery is a store that sells food and other essential home supplies and such as paper products.”
2. **Do not use “you” or I** in most definitions. “A vacation is a period of time when you don’t work” inaccurately limits the definition to the reader.
3. **Do not define a word by mere repetition.** “A baked potato is a potato that has been baked” adds nothing to what the term to be defined has already told readers.
4. **Define a word in simple and familiar terms.** The purpose of definition is to clarify, not to confuse. Samuel Johnson’s definition of network in his eighteenth-century dictionary was “anything reticulated or decussated at equal distances with interstices between the intersections,” a well-known example of how not to define.
5. **Keep the class small but adequate.** The class should be large enough to include all the members of the term you are defining but no larger. The class soldier is too small for a definition of the term lieutenant because there are lieutenants in the navy as well as in the army. On the other hand, the class person is too large because it includes far more elements than necessary. Commissioned officer is an appropriate compromise.
6. **State the differentiating characteristics precisely.** “A flute is a musical instrument played by blowing” includes far too many musical instruments that are not flutes.

Establishing A Thesis

A definition paper usually turns out to be an expression of opinion. An escapist movie for one person may be a cultural gem for another person. The expression of an attitude toward the term gives life to a definition paper and makes it more interesting to read than a dictionary definition alone would be. In other words, a definition paper benefits from a thesis. For most writers, the opinion in the thesis reflects both an understanding of the term and an attitude toward the meaning of the term.

Being square is not at bad as people think; in fact, squareness is the ideal state for a person with serious goals.

An ideal vacation can mean snoozing in the backyard just as much as seeing new sights.

The generation gap is one of humanity’s best hopes for progress.

Love is a severe mental illness curable only by time.

Organizing a Definition Essay

Definition papers follow no set pattern. Most turn out to be combinations of patterns determined by what is being defined and what the writer has to say about it. Some possibilities are illustrated here.

Details

An extended definition may list many specific distinguishable items. To the bare definition of a dog as a “carnivorous domesticated mammal of the family Canidae” may be added numerous descriptive details as to size, build, color, use, and other traits.

The *masonquo* is a six-stringed lyre having a hollow leather-covered soundchamber much like that of a banjo. It has a bridge and, since it lacks a neck or fingerboard, the strings are

stretched to a framework of sticks. The keys are primitive but ingenious and effective. All six strings are struck simultaneously with a small piece of leather or a feather (Harold Courlander, *Musical Quarterly*).

Comparison-contrast

A term can be made clearer and more interesting by distinguishing it from similar terms: a paper on socialism might distinguish it from communism; a paper on love might distinguish it from infatuation. Discussing opposites sometimes works well too: a definition paper on a square might take the same set of circumstances and contrast a square's behavior to a swinger's.

Like gliding, ballooning depends for movement on luck with thermals, which are currents rising off sun-warmed fields and hills; unlike gliding, ballooning gives a pilot no control of direction—except up and down (*The New Yorker*).

Or a strange object may be described through likeness as “the shape of a hen's egg” or “the color of a tomato”

To the wanderer from temperate zones, the papaya might be a dwarfed Tom Watson or an unripe cantaloupe. This interesting native of the torrid zone assumes a variety of shapes and sizes. It may be elongated like a watermelon, or almost spherical, or even slightly compressed on one end, like our crook-neck squash. Within, it is much like a muskmelon, with a multitude of seeds, which cling tenaciously to the firm, thick, salmon-colored lining which is its edible part (G.W. James, *The Green Caldron*).

On the other hand, an object may be described through difference as “larger than a tennis ball” or “not so sour as a lemon.” The following example is from a definition of the word *tact*.

A great many would-be socialites entertain the illusion that politeness and tact are the same thing. That is why they are only would-be's. Politeness is a negative and tact a positive virtue. Politeness is merely avoiding trampling on another person's toes, while tact is placing a Persian carpet under his feet. (Margaret Van Horne, *The Green Caldron*.)

Negation

It is sometimes helpful to mention what an item is not in order to clarify what it is. This method is particularly useful in eliminating other items that might, if not mentioned, be confused with the item being defined: “Botanically speaking, a tomato is not a vegetable”; “A leprechaun is not to be confused with a ghost.”

Research is a word is often used narrowly, but I am using it not in any mean and cramped sense. It is not, for instance, restricted to the uncovering of specific new facts, or the development of new scientific processes, although it is partly this. It is not encompassed by learned papers in scholarly journals, although it is certainly this among other things. By research I mean, as well as all this, the publication of a biography, or a volume of poetry, or the delivery of a lecture that sets off a mental chain reaction among students. (Claude T. Bissell, *What the Colleges Are Doing*).

Classification

It may be both convenient and insightful to break some terms into separate classifications. Morality, for example, could be considered in two parts: passive morality (not doing evil) and active morality (doing good). The definition of a term denoting a group can be extended by indicating the classes of which it is composed; a definition of men's service organizations might include the major kinds of clubs, for example, secular and religious.

I found the Negro community the victim of a threefold malady: factionalism among the leaders, indifference in the educated group, and passivity in the uneducated. All of these conditions had almost persuaded me that no lasting social reform could ever be achieving in Montgomery (Martin Luther King, *Stride Toward Freedom*).

Illustration-exemplification

A paper defining a good movie would naturally discuss specific examples of good movies that fit the definition. Without the examples the paper would probably be abstract and dull. The definition of a general subject can be made more specific through the use of examples: Protestantism might be clarified by reference to the Lutherans or other denominations. Or incidents may be used to make abstract terms concrete: the old story of Abe Lincoln's walking miles to return a few cents owed its popularity to the fact that, by illustrating honesty in action, it got the idea of that virtue across much more effectively than could be done by any discussion of honesty in the abstract.

Drop a cricket ball from your hand and it falls to the ground. We say that the cause if its fall is the gravitational pull of the earth. In the same way, a cricket ball thrown into the air does not move on forever in the direction in which it was thrown; if it did it would leave the earth for good and voyage off into space. It is saved from this fate by the earth's gravitational pull which drags it gradually down, so that it falls back to earth. The faster we throw it, the further it travels before this occurs; a similar ball projected from a gun would travel for many miles before being pulled back to earth (Sir James Jeans, *The Universe Around Us*).

Process

A writer engaged in defining schizophrenia might make the illness more understandable with a step-by-step analysis of its progress from the first signs to its full development.

Cause-effect

An advocate of women's liberation, in defining the term, could make the term fuller and more persuasive by devoting some attention to the decades of discrimination that helped cause the birth, or rebirth, of the women's liberation movement.

The nature of some subjects demands definition in terms of their backgrounds. The meaning of a word like radar is implicit in its origin ("ra" stand for radio, "d" for detection, "a" for and, and "r" for ranging); and a phenomenon like a geyser or a volcano can best be explained through its cause.

The meter was originally intended to be one ten-millionth of the distance from the equator to the pole of the earth, measured on the surface. The measurements by means of which the first meter was prepared were inaccurate, however, and the real meter is the distance, measured at the freezing point of water, between two marks on a bar of platinum-iridium kept at the International Bureau of Weights and Measures at Sevres, France (W. A. Noyes, *Textbook of Chemistry*).

Many words call for discussion in terms of their effects or consequences. Christianity and Communism, for example, need to be explained in terms of their result as well as of their origins, and war and depression in terms of their effects. Definitions of mechanisms and processes (radar is again an example) are equally likely to involve a discussion of the uses to which they are put.

In adjusting to his new way of life, the hunting ape developed a powerful pair-bond, tying the male and female parents together during the breeding season. In this way, the females were sure of their males' support and were able to devote themselves to their maternal duties. The males were sure of their females' loyalty, were prepared to leave them for hunting, and avoid fighting over them. And the offspring were provided with the maximum of care and attention (Desmond Morris. *The Naked Ape*)

Narration

Narration is the telling of a story. A paper on competition could show that good and bad sides of the term in action by telling the story of the author's friendly and unfriendly rivalry with a fellow student during high school days.

Choosing a Topic

Define dogs rather than Rover, cathedrals rather than Westminster Abbey, or a certain class of airplanes rather than a specific plane of that type. Other writing approaches, for example, description, narration, and the character sketch, are better suited to treating particular persons and things. You may wish to use plural term to help keep this generic emphasis: dogs, cathedrals, F14's.

The suggestions here lend themselves to extended definitions. Remember that definition papers are not tied down to any one writing pattern. Use whatsoever approach or combination of approaches works best. And always check with you teacher about the appropriateness of the topic you choose.

1. Soul food
2. Ham actor
3. Sportsmanship
4. Conflict of interest
5. Fad
6. Atheism
7. Intellectual
8. Courtesy
9. Acid rock or punk rock
10. Worship
11. Good marriage
12. Conscience
13. An advertising slogan such as "the real thing"
14. Good salesperson
15. Friendship
16. Santa Claus
17. Jealously
18. Obscenity
19. Fear
20. Road hypnosis
21. Regional terms like ruana, sukiyaki, goober, or pedicab, which may be in common use in some areas but which are so limited in locale that they may be unfamiliar to many readers.
22. Technical terms like azimuth, ombudsman, recidivism, onomatopoeia, which are so specialized to be either unknown to general readers or not well understood.
23. Slang terms like cool (noun), groovy, mod, your own thing, funky, rad, vibes, up tight, or others which are either too new or too limited in use to be generally understood in all their implications.
24. Abstract terms like culture, apathy, sportsmanship, education, love, morality, or freedom, which continually require specific definition because of the variety of interpretations possible.
25. Familiar terms like coed, spring fever, conscience, or homesickness, which are known to all but which may have special personal meaning for you that you would like to express.
26. Pairs of words that may be usefully defined together in order to overcome frequent confusion of the two: courtesy and etiquette, job position, art and science, knowledge and intelligence, theology and religion, possibly and probability.
27. Controversial terms: sexual revolution, generation gap, women's liberation, police brutality, pro-choice

Examples of Extended Definitions

In the examples that follow, note the variety of methods of development used to present that terms effectively to readers.

Maps by C.C. Wylie

A map is a conventional picture of an area of land, sea, or sky. Perhaps the maps most widely used are the road maps given away by the oil companies. They show the cultural features such as states, towns, parks, and roads, especially paved roads. They show also natural features, such as rivers and lakes, and sometimes mountains. As simple maps, most automobile drivers have on various occasions used sketches drawn by service station men, or by friends, to show the best automobile route from one town to another.

The distinction usually made between “maps” and “charts” is that a chart is a representative of an area consisting chiefly of water: a map represents an area that is predominantly land. It is easy to see how this distinction arose in the days when there was no navigation over the land, but a truer distinction is that charts are specially designed for use in navigation, whether at sea or in the air.

Maps have been used since the earliest civilization, and explorers find that they are used in rather simple civilizations at the present time by people who are accustomed to traveling. For example, Arctic explorers have obtained considerable help from maps of the coastlines showing settlements, drawn by Eskimo people. Occasionally maps show not only the roads, but also pictures of other features. One of the earliest such maps dates from about 1400 B.C. It shows not only roads, but also lakes with fish, and a canal with crocodiles and a bridge over the canal. This is somewhat similar to the modern maps of a state which show for each large town some feature of interest or the chief products of that town.

The Musician Filibuster by Karen Thompson (student)

The term vamp, when applied to music, has a meaning all its own. It is not short for vampire; nor has it anything to do with the construction of a shoe. It is a musical device employed to fill the time while the lead in a musical comedy is trying desperately to remember the first line of his song.

A vamp is nearly always short—hardly ever more than four measures long. The repeat signs before and after, however, can extend the little ditty indefinitely. A vamp embodies the musical intricacies of the oom-pah-pah variety. The nuances of this complicated rhythmical structure and the technique required to execute it—a most appropriate term—are hardly worth discussing. The orchestration, however, is vitally important. If the violins are playing a descending passage, the flutes will most assuredly have an ascending one. A little counterpoint never hurts a healthy vamp. The violas and double basses play or plunk on the offbeats, and the celli, more than likely, sustain a low note for the duration of the interlude. The winds, brass, and percussion also perform these same three basic functions: doubling the melody, supplementing the rhythm, or sustaining a basic chord.

Orchestra members have their own devices to counteract the monotony of a vamp. If the vamp is adequately extended, one may light up a Lucky (or a Winston, or a Salem—if the prompter has fallen asleep, the whole state of North Carolina could go up in smoke). Other orchestra members tell jokes to pass the time. Some block out the sound, if only for an instant, by getting in one good yawn. Generally, however, a mood of relaxation overtakes the entire orchestra, and a subdued snicker circulates among the members.

The unsuspecting audience has little, if any, warning of an approaching vamp. If it is too dark to leaf through the program, the best thing for a member of the audience to do is to grit his teeth and endure the awful noise. After all, it can't last forever.

A vamp may be used for any number of reasons. Costume changes and set changes are frequently done to the tune of a vamp. Usually it is only when a singer has forgotten his first phrase that the vamp is extended to an unreasonable length. Sooner or later someone, perhaps the piccolo player, will think of the line and shout it to the singer.

The vamp is used primarily in operetta and musical comedy when the composer or musicians are pressed for a time-waster or a link between the recognizable tunes. The vamp is definitely an integral part of musical comedy. Its use has, on occasion, been exaggerated far beyond the point of absurdity, yet its deletion would set musical comedy several decades.

Color by Edward Shils

In itself color is meaningless. It is not like religion, which is belief and entails either voluntary or hereditary membership in a community of believers and therewith exposure to an assimilation of a tradition of beliefs. It is not like kinship, which is a tangible structure in which the individual has lived, which has formed him and to which he is attached. It is not like intellectual culture, which is belief and an attitude toward the world (or parts of it). It is not even like nationality, which is a superimposition of beliefs about a community of culture upon a common primordial existence of that community in a given territory. The designation of a person as being of a particular religious community or of a particular school of thought or even of a given nationality is a statement about that person's mind, about the pattern of meaning by which he interprets reality. His participation in the interpretation of reality according to that pattern of meaning might be hypocritical, it is undoubtedly intermittent and vague. All this notwithstanding, the involvement of the mind is a major thought not the sole component in the definition of the person in question. It is not this way with color.

Color is just color. It is a physical, a spectroscopic fact. It carries no compelling deducible conclusions regarding a person's beliefs or his position in any social structure. It is like height or weight—the mind is not involved. Yet it attracts the mind; it is the focus of passionate sentiments and beliefs. The sentiments color evokes are not the sentiments of aesthetic appreciation. Nor does color have any moral significance—color is not acquired or possessed by leading a good or a bad life. No intentions are expressed by color; no interpretations of the world are inherent in it; no attachments are constituted by it. The mind is not at work in it, and is not a social relationship. It is inherently meaningless.

The Meaning of "Negro" from Negro History Bulletin

The word "Negro" has a long history. The Spanish and Portuguese with their Latin background began the African slave trade. They called black Africans "Negroes" because Negro meant black in their languages. During most of the 19th century, black Americans preferred the terms African or Colored or African-American. Those who favor latter point out that many Americans are called by the name of their ancestors' land; Italian-American, Polish-American, Jewish-American, and others prefer the word "black" and are using it widely, so that books and magazine articles carry it, as the opposite to "white." However, black is a misnomer, just as white is, for neither white nor black convey adequately the color or race of the people described; and certainly, there is genetically neither a white race nor a black race.

The word "Negro" is mainly a sociological word and has little relation to biology. Persons who by appearance are "white" have been designated as Negroes, because there were some ancestors who were Africans. Accordingly, the study of "the Negro" in the United States has to face first of all the difficulty of definition. It is difficult to give a fixed and definite meaning to this word. It has been used in its narrow sense, to include the primitive group of darker African peoples. Characterized by darker skins, curly hair, broad facial features and dolichocephalic (long) heads; their colors varied from nearly black to light brown and yellow. Their original habitation was Africa, south of the Sahara and north of the line running southeast from the Gulf of Biafra to the Tana River, and they have never numbered more than a million persons. In its widest sense, it has been used in the United States especially, to embrace all of the people—not only of dark skin, but also any person whose ancestors have been Negroes. In few cases of racial designations is this term more loosely used and in no case is it more difficult to fix an established meaning. The terms "white" and "black" are equally as indefinite and are used as loosely without scientific exactness.

In the United States, one may be called a Negro and be white in appearance. In Africa one may be called a Negro only if he is one of the definite Negroid types, who perhaps have never been in relatively large numbers as the continent goes. The brown, the yellow and some of the black peoples of Africa are excluded in the African use of the term. If we use the term "Negro" in its American use—we then find that the Negroes of Africa and the United States have been the creators of a valuable civilization, and have no need to hid themselves under the umbrella of a new name.

There has not been and there is not one unvarying Negro type. Persons of various colors and features have been known to have "Caucasian-like features." The pygmies have been described by some observers as coffee-brown, and at times, by others as red and light yellow. The Fellatahs and Nigritians vary in color from light brown to dark brown. The Fellatahs girls were described by one traveler as having beautiful forms which with their complexions "of freshest bronze" gave him the impression that they could not be "excelled in symmetry by the women of any other country." Another seventeenth century contemporary wrote, "The women of Nekans (in north) are handsome body'd and fair, with black and shining hair, which makes them take pride to frequent the Bathes." The Bahima people were a "tall and finely formed race of nutty brown color with almost European features." This variation of color has been so typical over the African continent that one student of the problem has been led to conclude that the mulatto is as typically African as the black man. The Negroes in America are essentially Americans and not Africans. There is little except color which shows their relationships to Africa and there are Negroes whose color does not show it, but who are proud of their African background. They have learned the language and social techniques of the United States, the country in which they live. But they came to this country from a culture which has been developing in African through many centuries. There are few traces of African culture in Negro life in American and the Negro-American seems not to be essentially different in this respect from the Irish-American, the German-American, the Jewish-American, the Scotch-American, or any other American types so far as the culture of the lands of the ancestors are concerned. Millions of Europeans have come to America and millions of Africans have been brought from Africa to America. They have all become a part of the American population.

These Africans, designated as Negroes, have been marching forward in all lines of endeavors and achievement. They are proving that civilization and contributions to it are not based on race or color but upon the individual men or women of ability who seek to advance themselves, be they white or black. In these respects God is no respecter, whatever their names and colors.

Lagniappe by Mark Twain

We picked up one excellent word—a word worth traveling to New Orleans to get; a nice, limber, expensive, handy word—"Lagniappe." They pronounce it lanny-yap. It is Spanish—so they said. We discovered it at the head of a column of odds and ends in the Picayune the first day; heard twenty people use it the second; inquired what it meant the third; adopted it and got facility in swinging it the fourth. It has a restricted meaning, but I think the people spread it out a little when they choose. It is the Spanish quarter of the city. When a child or a servant buys something in a shop—or even the mayor or governor, for aught I know—he finishes the operation by saying:

"Give me something for lagniappe."

The shopman always responds; gives the child a bit of licorice root, gives the servant a cheap cigar or a spool of thread, gives the governor—I don't know he gives the governor, support likely.

When you are invited to drink—and this does occur now and then in New Orleans—and you say, "What, again?—no, I've had enough," the other party says, "But just this one time more—this is for lagniappe." When the beau perceives that he is stacking his compliments a trifle too high, and sees by the young lady's countenance that the edifice would have been better with the top compliment left off, he puts his "I beg pardon, no harm intended," into the briefer from of "Oh, that's for lagniappe." If the waiter in the restaurant stumbles and spills a gill of coffee down the back of your neck, he says, "F'r lagniappe, sah," and gets you another cup without extra charge.

“No Sweat” by John D. Myers (student)

“No sweat” is one of the most descriptive slang terms that I have ever encountered. I first heard the term used in Korea, where it appeared in almost every conversation among the American soldiers stationed there. It is admittedly a somewhat vulgar expression for formal use, but for saying much in a few words, it is hard to beat.

Strangely enough, “no sweat” does not refer to the amount of work involved in doing something, nor yet to the temperature. It refers to the absence of worry and apprehension involved in a certain action. Used properly, it carries a note of reassurance; it is a short way of saying “Don’t work yourself up over this matter, as it is all taken care of.” For example, let us suppose that a lovely young lady, in backing her car out of a parking lot, accidentally scrapes a young man’s fender. The young man gallantly releases her from all responsibility by saying cheerfully, “No sweat,” and the situation probably terminates in a date instead of a lawsuit.

But the expression means more than a release from obligation, as can be seen from the following example: A production engineer calls in his foreman and explains that he will need four thousand breaker units by the end of the week. The foreman replies, “No sweat,” and the production engineer knows he is safe in telling the company’s sales representative to confirm delivery.

If “no sweat” had been current in New Orleans at the time Mark Twain wrote “Lagniappe,” the restaurant scene in which the waiter spilled coffee down the customer’s neck would have a different outcome. Before the careless fellow had had time to make any kind of apology, the injured person would have looked up with a smile and said, “No sweat,” and the incident would have been closed.

Parentage and Parenthood by Ashley Montagu

It is apparently very necessary to distinguish between parenthood and parentage. Parenthood is an art; parentage is the consequence of a mere biological act. The biological ability to produce conception and to give birth to a child as it requires to be cared for. That ability, like every other, must be learned. It is highly desirable that parentage be not undertaken until the art of parenthood has been learned. Is this a counsel of perfection? As things stand now, perhaps it is, but it need not always be so. Parentage is often irresponsible; parenthood is responsible. Parentage at best is irresponsibly responsible for the birth of a child. Parenthood is responsible for the development of a human being—not simply a child, but a human being. I do not think it is an overstatement to say that parenthood is the most important occupation in the world.

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