

DEFINITION

DEFINITION WILL SHARE YOUR SPECIAL UNDERSTANDING about some idea or thing. Sometimes a definition will prove to be a small but important part of an essay; sometimes a definition will be the sole work of an entire essay. When it's the major impetus of an essay, there are several points to remember.

First, don't rely on that old cliché of the dictionary or encyclopedia definition. Even if your intent is to show how inadequate or wrong-headed the dictionary might be, this device has been used far too often to be effective. The point of your essay is to provide your reader with a new way of looking at things — *your way*, not Noah Webster's.

One way of defining something is to say what it is not. If you're defining the idea of "home," you could begin by suggesting that the old saying "There's no place like home" is silly because there are, in fact, many places like home — or you could insist that home is really not a place at all. The opportunity to define is an opportunity to exercise your poetic imagination, to show how most people's sense of something is faulty or inadequate and that there is a better understanding (yours!) to consider.

In selecting a topic to define, look for something that you can define within your own experience and that will allow your poetic imagination some room to play. It might be a big mistake for your English instructor to define reggae or rap music, but there are many students who could do a great job. If you try to define something that is beyond the comprehension of your paper or your own experience, the task will become overwhelming and get mired down in details or abstractions. You could write a book trying to define a concept such as conservatism or liberalism and you still wouldn't have said anything that more than two other people would agree with. Students would be wise to avoid abstract notions such as patriotism, beauty, justice, love, or being a good sport.

On the other hand, it can be useful — even fun — to take a rather abstract notion and put a spin on it. There doesn't appear to be much point in defining a student, for example, but defining what we mean by a *good* student could be interesting. Push that definition to the limit to make a special point. A good student is not necessarily one that earns good grades or even one that does his or her best; a good student is one that makes the teacher feel like a good teacher. Or try defining a good teacher, a good parent, a good doctor, a good lover. In any case, if you are going to define something that everyone else has some idea about, you will need to shed fresh, even surprising light upon your subject.

A definition can be developed in a number of ways. A definition of a business management concept such as Total Quality Management (TQM), for instance, could begin with a **history** (a kind of process paper) of its inception in Japanese management systems, its migration across the Pacific, its implementation and transformation in American systems, and its predicted demise. It could also (or instead) include **examples** of the kind of labor conflict that TQM is supposed to eliminate or alleviate. Or it could describe TQM as a **process**, the steps involved in its implementation, or involve an **analysis** of its principles and its place in management theory. **Contrasts** to other management theories might be appropriate, demonstrating what TQM is not as well as what it is. We could even think of it as a **Cause and Effect** situation in which we describe how TQM responds to certain needs in the workplace. A definition essay is not limited to any one method of development and it may, in fact, employ more than one method at once.

Some rhetorical points about defining things:

- Avoid using the phrases "is where" and "is when" in your definition: "Total Quality Management is when management and labor agree to. . . ." "A computer virus is where"
- Avoid circular definitions (repeating the defined term within the predicate, the definition itself): "A computer virus is a virus that destroys or disrupts software"

- Avoid using a too narrow definition, one that would unduly limit the scope of your paper: "Reggae music is sung on the Caribbean island of Jamaica. . . ."

Here is a paragraph definition SUCCESS.

Main Idea (abstract statement) = Success is determination.

(this is abstract because everyone has a different idea of what determination means I must develop this idea, so you understand what MY UNIQUE SPECIFIC definition of determination is all about.)

example:

I have a friend who at the age of 14 had a very tragic accident. His name is Tommy. He was with a group of friends and as young energetic youths will do, he dove into a lake without proper caution. The lake was only a few feet deep, and he hit his head on the bottom and broke his neck. He became a paraplegic; he lost the use of his arms and legs and was confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life! It takes a special person to rebound from this type of physical disability, and Tommy is one of those people. He never let this horrible accident stifle his zeal to enjoy his life. With courage and determination he had a car specifically built to suit his needs, and for four years with the help of peers and family, was able to drive himself to college and ultimately earned a Bachelor's degree from Rutgers with a dual major in psychology and computer science. He then garnered a job with a large communications firm as a computer technician and worked there for the next twenty years. Although he had many setbacks during these years, the obvious being the physical environment, he overcame them all. Simple tasks like opening or shutting a light or a door or just going to the toilet were enormous projects for a person who has no useful arms or legs, yet Tommy never gave up, and was rewarded for his hard work by being made a project manager. After twenty years of running his department, he retired to a home he bought in Belmar NJ. I could go on and on about how he drove his car all around the US, or how to this day attends concerts of musicians who he befriended, or how he supports his ailing elderly mom in his house. His accomplishments are incredible and all because he never gave up. He is the embodiment of determination. I admire him so much, and learned a lot about how to be successful from him!

NOW – do you see what I think is determination and how it relates to success? I hope you do. It is easy for me to write this about my real friend – I just think of what it is that made me say he is determined, and I show you.

Purpose

Tracing a boundary

To define to a reader your perspective of a subject . What makes it what it is?

Types

Short Definition

Used to perhaps narrow and limit a topic for further exploration.

ex: You are assigned to write a paper on Schizophrenia. You might begin with a definition of it.. You could say: It is a brain disease (the general class) its symptoms include hallucination, disorganized behavior, incoherence, and often withdrawal. Short definition are useful at any time within a larger writing.

Extended Definition

Relies on other rhetorical methods to give a complete picture of the topic.

ex: You are writing an essay defining poetry. Using *Division or Analysis* you would provide *Examples* of each element (imagery, rhyme etc,,). You might *Compare/Contrast* poetry with prose. You might discuss the *Effect* of poetry on a reader. You might provide a *Process* to write poetry. In fact Extended Definition is more or less the application of many other rhetoric methods. Like Description Extended Definition tries to show its reader its subject. It does so by establishing boundaries to differentiate the subject from anything else that it may be

confused with it.

The Process—consideration to include in your definition

1. Is the subject unique or there other things like it?
2. In what different forms does it of occur
3. When & Where do we find it?
4. What is it at the present moment?
5. What does it do?
6. How is it put together—what parts are there?

Checklist

- ✓ Does your writing provide plenty of concrete examples?
- ✓ Do your examples prove your ideas?