In writing the definition essay, the writer is called upon to identify the distinguishing features of a term, to establish its boundaries, and to separate that term from all other terms. Following these steps will enable both the writer and the reader to use the term appropriately.

There are three types of definitions: formal/essential, informal/synonym, and extended.

The formal/essential definition does three things: (1) names the item being defined, (2) places it in a broad category, and (3) distinguishes it from other items in that category. Note the three examples below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item being defined</th>
<th>broad category</th>
<th>distinguishing features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A voiceprint</td>
<td>is a graphical record</td>
<td>of a person’s voice Characteristics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To parboil</td>
<td>is to boil meat, until they are partially cooked.</td>
<td>Vegetables, or fruits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A vacuum cleaner</td>
<td>is a household appliance</td>
<td>that uses suction to Clean floors, carpets, And upholstery.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This definition is brief and has certain built-in limitations: abstract terms often need more elaboration; some terms have multiple meanings, etc. For these reasons it is often more effective to build an extended definition around an essential definition.

*One of the pitfalls of the essential/formal definition is the “circular definition” - which occurs when a writer defines a term by repeating it or changing its form slightly. For example, if you say, “an oncologist is a physician who practices oncology,” you will only frustrate readers who are not familiar with oncology, or who may have never even heard of it. Therefore, to avoid circularity, you should choose terms and examples that the readers can relate to.*

Other things to avoid are:

*Overly broad definitions* - definitions that attempt to cover too much territory. An example of this would be a definition of a cat as a small, furry animal. Such a definition is broad and could include many other animals as well. Be sure that your definition includes distinguishing features that set it apart from other similar things. In other words, be as precise as possible.
Overly narrow definitions- the opposite extreme of too broad a definition is the definition that is too narrow. A definition that is too narrow will restrict and exclude information. For example, to define public transportation as a means of getting to work is to exclude other general and specific purposes for which one might uses this means of transportation.

2. The second type of definition is **informal/synonymous**.

Synonyms are words that have almost the same meaning. They enable writers to clarify meanings of unfamiliar words without using confusing explanations. Because these words are not identical, they give a slightly different meaning to the term. For example one might use the term *object* to aid the definition of the term *protest*. The terms are similar enough to show relation and aid understanding, yet different enough require further explanation. The use of synonyms can often help a writer break through a communication barrier. For the informal definition, one might substitute not only another explanatory word, but also a phrase or clause to further assist the definition. The informal definition is generally used to explain a term, and is frequently linked to the extended definition.

3. **The extended definition** is used to further explain complex or unfamiliar terms, or terms within definitions. They are used when a writer finds it necessary to go beyond the essential definition and write an entire paragraph or essay explaining a term. Many new technical, social, and economic terms often require extended definitions. Additionally, terms with multiple meanings, based on context, frequently require extended definition. For example, a defense attorney may find it necessary to provide an extended definition of *reasonable doubt* to a jury deciding the fate of his/her client. You may want an extended definition of what I call *extenuating circumstances* in the attendance clause of your syllabi. Definition can be extended in three ways:

1. Through the use of concrete examples- here you use specific and detailed examples to clarify meaning.
2. Comparison- compare unfamiliar term to a known principle or experience. Contrast- to define by negation: to explain what something is by stating what it is not; darkness is the absence of light; a marriage is not a casual relationship.
3. Cause/effect- explains how something happened, came to be, and what the consequences/results are.
Often, rather than choosing one type of definition, in longer exercises a student may use a combination of definition strategies in order to craft the most effective definition paper.