Writing the Definition Essay

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; you will select one of these patterns for your Definition Essay Assignment.

1. 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 voice-print record</td>
<td>is a graphical</td>
<td>of a person’s Characteristics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>voice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To parboil</td>
<td>is to boil</td>
<td>until they are partially cooked.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meat, vegetables, or fruits cooked.</td>
<td>A vacuum cleaner is a</td>
<td>that uses suction to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>household appliance</td>
<td>Clean floors,</td>
<td>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 use 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.

**Your Definition Essay:**

For your Definition Essay, you are to (1) identify a Definition format, and select a topic suitable to your purpose; (2) identify your definition term and source; (3) thoroughly research your topic and complete the essay planning pages; and (4) draft a 500 word essay using Microsoft
Word. Include one definition source and a minimum of three (3) sources of support and MLA in-text citation of all borrowed material. Be sure to lead with your definition and source; provide MLA citation for all borrowed information; place quotes within quotation marks; and thoroughly edit your work before submitting it for a grade. Remember to check your word count also to ensure that your essay meets the 500 word minimum requirement, and does not exceed the 550 word maximum; word count begins at the first word of your introduction and ends at the last word of your conclusion. You will need to include a Microsoft Word verified Word Count. Remember, it does not matter whether or not you think you need sources to support your essay; they are required, and failing to include them will result in you getting a ZERO on this assignment. Please review the minimum assignment requirements prior to submission.

BEFORE SUBMITTING YOUR PAPER, PLEASE REVIEW THESE QUESTIONS

1. Is your thesis clearly stated, and does each paragraph begin with a topic sentence which expands one of the points of your thesis?

2. Have you included the term you are defining, along with a citation from the definition source, and does your thesis incorporate some aspect(s) of the formal definition?

3. Does each paragraph begin with a clear and complete topic sentence, which elaborates on one of the main points from your thesis, and are each of your main points supported by a source and MLA in-text citation?

4. Do you introduce quotes and sources and effectively integrate them into your writing? Do you avoid sweeping generalizations and unsupported conclusions?

5. Do you develop and support your assertions?

6. Do you avoid slang, sexist language, and assertions not supported by either your sources or logical thinking?
7. Have you cited everywhere that you have borrowed?

8. Does your submission include your essay and a works cited page containing a minimum of three different supporting sources, plus a definition source?

9. Have you thoroughly proofed and edited your essay using spellcheck and grammar check?

10. Having done all these things, submit in good faith!

As always, I encourage you to pursue your interests, and to explore new territory in your writing.

500 Word Count Minimum: The essay has to be at least 500 words and it cannot exceed 550 words. The word count begins with the first word of the introduction and ends with the last word of the conclusion (Names, headings, and titles are not included in the word count). Thanks

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