

5. Definition

NOTE: The following is general information about the rhetorical mode. It is not meant to take the place of any specific instructions given by your instructor for this assignment. If your instructor wants you to write your paper in a different manner, then by all means do it the way your instructor requires you to do it.

Details of Definition

A definition essay takes a word, term, or phrase that is well-known to the author and defines it (explains it, expounds upon it, exemplifies it) for the reader.

Here are some specifics:

1. The introductory paragraph should contain a sentence like this one, in which the term is formally presented to the reader and defined:

A _____ is a _____ that _____.

(word) (category) (distinguishing details)

2. Use your own ideas and thoughts and examples to define your term. Don't use a formal dictionary definition.
3. Your definition must use the following format:

- a. Select a term.
(It could be a technical term, something used on your job, something you learned in school, or even a made-up word or phrase known only to you.)
- b. Place the term into a general category.
(Ask yourself, "How would I classify my term? What actually is the term? Into what kind of category would I put it according to its nature?")

E.g., A horse is an animal

A college is an institution of higher learning

A family is a unit

- c. Give details about the term (i.e., describe it) to distinguish it from other members of that same category.

For example, a chair is a piece of furniture, but so is a lamp. So, try to figure out how a chair is different from a lamp or a sofa or other pieces of furniture.

- d. So, as a result of following these steps, your definition sentence should sound like this:

A chair is a piece of furniture that has four legs, a back, maybe arms, and is made to
(term) (general category)

accommodate one person for the purpose of sitting.

or A nerd is a guy who wears last year's fashions, dark-rimmed glasses, is poor at sports, and usually has a genius I.Q.

- e. After you have given your formal definition sentence in the introduction, the rest of your paper goes on to tell why you define the term as you do. In other words, you could do one of the following:
- give further examples of your term
 - tell a personal incident about how you came to think of your term as you do
 - give more detailed information about the term in light of your personal definition of it
 - compare the term and your use of it to something else to show how your concept of the term is different, better, or more accurate
- f. Here are some possible suggestions for terms to define, some serious and some light-hearted.
- freedom
 - a "real" man
 - a "real" woman
 - a Democrat
 - a Republican
 - a Christian
 - an American
 - responsibility
 - a nerd
 - a fox
 - a stud
 - a jock
 - a wuss
 - gnarly
 - a rip-off
 - a dude
 - chilling out
 - or any other term that you can explain to your reader

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Details for Writing a Definition Essay

Here are the details of the procedure for writing a definition essay:

- 1. Point of Paper.** To explain to your reader how and why you are defining a certain word, term, or phrase.
- 2. Method.** To take a word or phrase from your own experience and explain what YOU mean by the phrase.

Do not include a formal dictionary definition. What matters is how YOU define the term, not how the dictionary defines it.

- 3. Procedure.** Define your term in two steps:
 - a. Place the term within a general category
 - b. Distinguish your term from other terms within the same category
 - c. The above (a and b) should be expressed in one succinct definition sentence similar to the following:

A [term] is a [category] that (proceed to give details and specifics about the term you're defining.)

term *category*

A chair is a piece of furniture that is used for one person to sit in, usually has four legs, should have a back support, and could have arms.

The above sentence should appear as the final sentence of the introductory paragraph.

- d. The rest of the paper will simply give more information about the term and why you're defining it as you are: examples, explanations, details, personal narratives, comparisons, and so on.

In short, "teach" the reader about your term.

- 4.** In general, select a term that is specific and something with which you have direct personal experience. Consider a term from one of your hobbies or from your job or from a sport that you play. Avoid vague and philosophical terms like *love* and *freedom*. If you choose a technical term that you learned about in a school course, do not use any kind of textbook for help or support. Let it all come from your own personal understanding and interpretation of that term.