

Definition



Writing Definitions

Brought to you by the Purdue University Online Writing Lab at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>

A formal definition is based upon a concise, logical pattern that includes as much information as it can within a minimum amount of space. It consists of three parts.

- The term (word or phrase) to be defined
- The class of object or concept to which the term belongs.
- The differentiating characteristics that distinguish it from all others of its class

You have readily available to you a number of such definitions, a single sentence in length, which you have been memorizing since grade school days. "Water (term) is a liquid (class) made up of molecules of hydrogen and oxygen in the ratio of 2 to 1 (distinguishing characteristics)." Practice in the writing of such brief formal definitions is good mental discipline as well as excellent training in conciseness and care in the use of words.

In writing a definition:

- Avoid defining with "is when" and "is where." These adverb phrase introducers do not work well when defining a word. A noun should be defined with a noun, a verb with a verb, an adjective with an adjective.
- Do not define a word by mere repetition.
- Define a word in simple and familiar terms.
- Keep your class small but adequate. It should be large enough to include all members of the term you are defining but no larger.
- State the differentiating characteristics precisely.

The following information must remain intact on every handout printed for distribution.

This page is located at

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/general/gl_define.html

Copyright ©1995-2003 by OWL at Purdue University and Purdue University. All rights reserved.

Use of this site, including printing and distributing our handouts, constitutes


<http://owl.english.purdue.edu>

<http://leo.stcloudstate.edu>

Revised Summer 2008

acceptance of our terms and conditions of fair use, available at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/lab/fairuse.html>.

To contact OWL, please visit our contact information page at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/lab/contact.html> to find the right person to call or email.

	<p>LEO: Literacy Education Online</p> <h2>The Definition Essay</h2>
---	---

def-i-ni-tion (def' e-nish' en) n. **1.** The act of defining a word, phrase, or term. **2.** The act of making clear and distinct. **3.** A determining of outline, extent, or limits.

Consider the following guidelines as you write your definition essay:

- Make your essay personal, amusing, vigorous, stimulating, memorable.
- Choose a generic topic rather than a specific topic. For example, write about churches but not Westminster Abbey.

Types of Definitions Traditionally Used in Definition Essays

Any combination of these traditional types of definitions can help clarify meaning for the reader of your definition essay:

- **Analysis:** Divide the subject into parts and define each part separately.
- **Classification:** According to dictionary definitions, what classes does the subject belong to?
- **Comparison:** The unfamiliar may be defined by showing its likeness to the familiar or its difference from it.
- **Details:** What are the physical characteristics, traditional thoughts, and other distinguishing attributes that describe the subject of the paper?
- **Examples and Incidents:** Narrate illustrations that can clarify a group, theory, or object.
- **Negation:** Mention what it is not in order to clear the ground for what it is.

- **Origins and Causes:** Where did the subject come from? What is the background information? What is the history of the subject?
- **Results, Effects, and Uses:** Discuss the consequences and uses of the subject.

Sample Definition Essay

What is This Thing Called Love?

A wise man once said that love is a wonderful thing. Although this statement leaves sparse room for argument, it does little to define what love is beyond the vague realm of wonderful. It is my duty as a devout romantic to embark upon the seemingly difficult task of defining love by looking at the history, explaining what love is not, and examining the uses of love and the results of that usage.

(Origin and Causes)

The origin of the word is probably the most logical place to start. As with many words in the English language, love is a derivative of the Latin word "causemajoraprobemus" which means "You're miserable when you got it and miserable when you don't." The word was created to explain the biological phenomenon that existed when certain individuals came into contact with each other and either remained together or went about their lives separately. Regardless of the outcome, the relationship was usually characteristic of throat lumps, knotted stomachs, weak knees, temporary loss of language, sweaty palms, dizziness, sneezing, and occasional nausea. Belligerent insanity also resulted. History clearly illustrates this. Can we ever forget the face that launched a thousand ships? Federally expressing Van Gogh's ear? The construction of Le Tour Eiffel? All of these were results of love and love lost.

(Negation)

Star-crossed lovers have stated that love is not hand nor foot nor any part belonging to a man. Matrimonial ceremonies also claim that love is not jealous or boastful. Let it be stated hear that love also is not a gourmet dish, a domesticated animal, or a latest trend. Love is not a strategic defense mechanism nor the best kept secret at the Pentagon. Love is not another seasoning to bottle and stick on the dust-lined shelves of the spice rack. Love is not to be confused with adhesive tape.

Instead, love is a great counterpart to late, evening thunder storms on hot July nights. Love goes well with cold pizza on picnic blankets. Love is cold, wet sand between bare toes. Love is a capitalistic sell-all for novels, Top-40 pop songs, summer movies, and greeting cards.

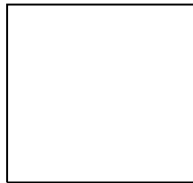
In its simplest terms, love is a four-letter word. Much like other words of similar letter make up, when expressed it can evoke laughter, pleasure, pain, anger, and

virtually any wave of reaction. Love also can be confused with feelings of indigestion and gas. Houses have been built, burned, and banished because of love.

[Return to the Write Place Catalogue](#)

For questions and suggestions, please e-mail us at leolink@stcloudstate.edu.

© 1995, 1996, 1997 The Write Place



This handout was written by Heidi Everett and revised for LEO by Judith Kilborn for the Write Place, St. Cloud State University. It may be copied for educational purposes only. If you copy this document, please include our copyright notice and the name of the writers; if you revise it, please add your name to the list of writers.

Last update: 28 September 1997

URL: <http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/acadwrite/definition.html>
