Writing a Definition

WHAT IS A DEFINITION ESSAY?

Definition is clarifying exactly what a concept, term, or phrase means. A definition essay, then, clarifies for readers exactly what a concept, term, or phrase means. These are not easy to define words, but complex and abstract ideas and phrases, which can make this easy sounding essay one of the more difficult to compose.

WHEN WRITING...

When writing a definition essay, you will use definition to clarify your meaning and develop an idea. Using definition as a rhetorical pattern to organize and develop a paragraph or even an entire essay is an especially effective method for defining abstract terms or phrases and complex ideas, which may not always be easy and straightforward to define. Entire articles and books have been written just to explain the meaning of one concept or term.

Because you must possess a thorough understanding of a concept, term, or phrase in order to compose an effective definition that makes clear to readers what the concept, term, or phrase is and what it is not, your instructors may assign extended definition essays that require you to use the entire essay to explore and define the meaning of complex or disputed concepts, terms, or phrases.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR REVISION

- Extended definitions are typically constructed in a two-step process that first places the term or concept in a general class and then distinguishes it from other terms or concepts in that same general class by showing how it differs from them.
- You can expand your definition by analyzing the etymology of (origin of) the term or concept. An etymological analysis offers an explanation of its roots, what it originally meant, how its meaning has evolved over time, and how those changes have influenced the current meaning.
- You might consider negation (explaining what the concept, term, or phrase is not) as a way to make the definition clear to your readers.
- You can develop your definition with specifically chosen examples of what your meaning is (and is not).
- Make sure that you avoid the common error of a circular definition. A circular definition is a definition that uses the word being defined as part of the definition or that requires you to already understand the word to understand its definition.

Kirszner, Laurie G., and Stephen R. Mandell. "Definition." *Patterns for College Writing: A Rhetorical Reader and Guide*, Bedford/St. Martin's, Boston, 2021, pp. 481–488.