

Definition and Analysis Essay Assignment



Assignment Description

There are definitions all around you, affecting who you are, what you think, and what you can (or cannot) do. In this assignment, you will deal with one of those definitions – you will define a word or concept, then analyze that definition. At its core, though, a definition essay is writing explaining what a term means. Some terms have definite, concrete meanings, such as glass, book, or tree. Terms such as honesty, honor, or love are abstract and depend more on a person's point of view.

Three Steps to Effective Definition

1. Tell readers what term is being defined.
2. Present clear and basic information.
3. Use facts, examples, or anecdotes that readers will understand.

A formal definition is based upon a concise, logical pattern that includes as much information as it can within a minimum amount of space. The primary reason to include definitions in your writing is to avoid misunderstanding with your audience. A formal definition consists of three parts.

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

For example:

- Water (*term*) is a liquid (*class*) made up of molecules of hydrogen and oxygen in the ratio of 2 to 1 (*differentiating characteristics*).
- Comic books (*term*) are sequential and narrative publications (*class*) consisting of illustrations, captions, dialogue balloons, and often focus on super-powered heroes (*differentiating characteristics*).
- Astronomy (*term*) is a branch of scientific study (*class*) primarily concerned with celestial objects inside and outside of the earth's atmosphere (*differentiating characteristics*).

Specifics

The majority of disagreements stem from a difference in definition, whether that definition be a specific term (formal definition) or a description of the problem at hand (extended definition).

Defining the thing under discussion can be more difficult than we think at first glance (just think about the arguments relating to abortion, immigration, and guns in this country for examples – is it a zygote or a baby? Is the child brought to the U.S. by her parents at the age of 4 “illegal,” and if so, in what sense might we see her as an illegal person? Is it gun control or gun safety?)

For this assignment, think about a term you have heard contested, discussed, or questioned (either by yourself or by someone else). Watch the news, read the papers/magazines/etc. and see what is being discussed in the public for some ideas. Choosing a definition is a key step in writing a definition essay. You need to understand the term before you can define it for others. Read the dictionary, but don't just copy the definition. Explain the term briefly in your own words. Also, it's important to limit your term before you start defining it. For example, you could write forever on the term “love.” To limit it, you would write about either “romantic love,” “platonic love,” or “first love.”

You will probably want to incorporate a mixture of approaches as described in our textbook (description, exemplification, compare/contrast, etc.)

Thesis Statement of a Definition Essay

The thesis statement usually identifies the term being defined and provides a brief, basic definition. Ex: *Assertiveness is standing up for your rights.* The analysis of the paper takes place when you explain *why* assertiveness is standing up for your rights.

Remember: A definition essay is writing that explains what a term means. When writing a definition essay, remember to tell readers what term is being defined, to present a clear and basic definition, and to use facts, examples, or anecdotes that readers will understand.

Methods for Writing Definition Essays (use of other modes for support):

Most of the modes we have studied so far can be used as methods in the definition essay. For example, to define something, a writer can

- Describe it
- Tell stories about it (anecdotes)
- Compare or contrast it to other things
- Give examples of it
- Classify it and identify its unique properties
- Describe causes and effects of the item being defined

Analysis

Analysis is, in its simplest form, a detailed examination of the elements or structure of something, typically as a basis for discussion or interpretation. You will be discussing a definition, but you will also be analyzing that definition, or breaking it down to explain how it works (or doesn't). Analytical papers, by definition, are more than just summaries that demonstrate that you are familiar with required course materials; they are composed of original, carefully crafted arguments about a topic.