Steps in Writing a Definition Essay

==**This type of paper requires students to write a personal yet academic and documented definition of one specific word. The definition must be thorough and lengthy.**== It is essential that you choose a word that will give you plenty to write about, and there are a few standard tactics you can use to elaborate on the term.

1. CHOOSING THE RIGHT WORD and EXPLORING IT

==**Choose an abstract word with a complex meaning.**== A simple word that refers to a concrete word will not give you much to write about, but a complex word that refers to an abstract concept provides more material to explore.

- Typically, nouns that refer to a person, place, or thing are too simple for a definition essay. Nouns that refer to an idea work better, however, as do most adjectives.
- For example, the word "house" is fairly simple and an essay written around it may be dull. By switching to something slightly more abstract like "home," however, you can play around with the definition more. A "home" is a concept, and there are many elements involved in the creation of a "home." In comparison, a "house" is merely a structure.

Make sure that the word can mean different things to different people. A definition essay is somewhat subjective by nature since it requires you to analyze and define a word from your own perspective. If the answer you come up with after analyzing a word is the same answer anyone else would come up with, your essay may appear to lack depth, and an essay written around it may be dull. By switching to something slightly more abstract like "home," however, you can play around with the definition more. A "home" is a concept, and there are many elements involved in the creation of a "home." In comparison, a "house" is merely a structure.

Read the dictionary definitions. While you will not be relying completely on the dictionary definition for your essay, familiarizing yourself with the official, COMMONLY USED definition will allow you to compare your own understanding of the concept with the simplest, most academic explanation of it.

- As an example, one definition of "friend" is "a person attached to another by feelings of affection or personal regard." Your own ideas or beliefs about what a "friend" really is likely include much more information, but this basic definition can present you with a good starting point in forming your own.

Research the word's origins. Look up your chosen word in the *Oxford English Dictionary* or in another etymology dictionary

- These sources can tell you the history behind a word, which can provide further insight on a general definition as well as information about how a word came to mean what it means today.

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Analyze the Word. Separate a word into various parts. Analyze and define each part in its own paragraph.

- You can separate "return" into "re-" and "turn." The word "friendship" can be separated into "friend" and "ship."
- In order to analyze each portion of a word, you will still need to use additional defining tactics like negation and classification.
- Note that this tactic only works for words that contain multiple parts. The word "love," for instance, cannot be broken down any further. If defining "platonic love," though, you could define both "platonic" and "love" separately within your essay.

Classify the term. Specify what classes and parts of speech a word belongs to according to a standard dictionary definition.

- While this information is very basic and dry, it can provide helpful context about the way that a given word is used.

Compare an unfamiliar term to something familiar. An unfamiliar or uncommon concept can be explained using concepts that are more accessible to the average person.

- Many people have never heard of the term "confrere," for instance. One basic definition is "a fellow member of a profession, fraternity, etc." As such, you could compare "confrere" with "colleague," which is a similar yet more familiar concept

Provide traditional details about the term. Explain any physical characteristics or traditional thoughts used to describe your term of choice.

- The term "home" is often visualized physically as a house or apartment. In more abstract terms, "home" is traditionally thought to be a warm, cozy, and safe environment. You can include all of these features in a definition essay on "home."

Use examples to illustrate the meaning. People often relate to stories and vivid images, so using a fitting story or image that relates to the term can be used in clarifying an abstract, formless concept.

- In a definition essay about "kindness," for example, you could write about an act of kindness you recently witnessed. Someone who mows the lawn of an elderly neighbor is a valid example, just as someone who gave you an encouraging word when you were feeling down might be.

Use negation to explain what the term does not mean. If a term is often misused or misunderstood, mentioning what it is not is an effective way to bring the concept into focus.

- A common example would be the term "courage." The term is often associated with a lack of fear, but many will argue that "courage" is more accurately described as acting in spite of fear.

- **Provide background information.** This is when your research about the etymology of a word will come in handy. Explain where the term originated and how it came to mean what it currently means.

2. POSSIBLE STRUCTURE OF A DEFINITION ESSAY

Introduce the standard definition. You need to clearly state what your word is along with its traditional or dictionary definition in your introductory paragraph.

- By opening with the dictionary definition of your term, (should be a cited quote) you create context and a basic level of knowledge about the word. This will allow you to introduce and elaborate on your own definition.
- This is especially significant when the traditional definition of your term varies from your own definition in notable ways.

Define the term in your own words in your thesis. Your actual thesis statement should define the term in your own words.

- Keep the definition in your thesis brief and basic. You will elaborate on it more in the body of your paper.
- Avoid using passive phrases involving the word "is" when defining your term. The phrases "is where" and "is when" are especially clunky.
- Do not repeat part of the defined term in your definition.

Separate different parts of the definition into separate paragraphs. Each tactic or method used to define your term should be explored in a separate paragraph.

- Note that you do not need to use all the possible methods of defining a term in your essay. You should use a variety of different methods in order to create a full, well-rounded picture of the term, but some tactics will work great with some terms but not with others.

Conclude with a summary of your main points. Briefly summarize your main points around the start of your concluding paragraph.

- This summary does not need to be elaborate. Usually, looking at the topic sentence of each body paragraph is a good way to form a simple list of your main points.
- You can also draw the essay to a close by referring to phrases or images evoked in your introduction.

Mention how the definition has affected you, if desired. If the term you define plays a part in your own life and experiences, your final concluding remarks are a good place to briefly mention the role it plays.

- Relate your experience with the term to the definition you created for it in your thesis.

BE SURE THE THESIS SENTENCE IS <u>UNDERLINED</u>, THE TITLE INCLUDES THE FOCUS WORD AND YOUR POSITION ON IT AND USE *ITALICS* WHEN TYPING THE FOCUS WORD IN THE PAPER, AND PRESTO…