Chapter 12: Definition--Establishing Boundaries

Do you have questions? You are not alone. What does egregious mean? What does the governor mean by left-winger? To avoid puzzling and provoking your readers, you will often need to explain the meaning of some word or term. The term may be unfamiliar, used in an unfamiliar sense, or mean different things to different people. Whenever you clarify the meaning of some term, you are defining.

Humans are instinctively curious. We start asking about meanings as soon as we can talk, and we continue to seek, as well as supply, definitions all through life. When you define, you identify the features that distinguish a term, thereby putting a fence around it, establishing its boundaries, and separating it from all others. Knowing these features enables both you and your reader to use the term appropriately.

Sometimes a word, phrase, or sentence will settle a definition question. To clear up the mystery of a word, all you need to do is insert a parenthetical phrase (with the definition) after the word. But when you’re dealing with new terms, brief definitions won’t provide the reader with enough information for proper understanding.

Abstract terms—those standing for things we can’t see, touch, or otherwise detect with our five senses—often require extended definitions, too. Terms like democracy or bravery are too complex, and people have to many differing ideas about what they mean. The same holds true for some concrete terms—those standing in for things we can perceive with our five senses. If you are writing an argument recommending life sentences for convicted drug-pushers, you would need to explain just what you mean by the term drug-pusher, and perhaps even what you mean by the term life sentence.

Types of Definitions

Three types of definition—synonyms, essential definitions, and extended definitions—serve writers’ needs. Although the first two seldom require more than a word or a sentence, an extended definition can run to several pages. The three types, however, are related. Synonyms and essential definitions share space between the covers of dictionaries, and both furnish starting points for extended definitions.

Synonyms

Synonyms are words with very nearly the same meanings. Synonyms let writers clarify meanings of unfamiliar words without using cumbersome explanations. Because synonyms are not identical twins, using them puts a slightly different shade of meaning on a message. (You need to consider the connotative meaning of a word as well as its denotative meaning when using a synonym—the connotative meanings must be similar, or your reader may be confused.) Still, synonyms provide a convenient means of breaking a communication logjam.
**Essential Definitions**
An essential definition does three things:

1. names the item being defined;
2. places it in a broad category; and,
3. distinguishes it from other items in that category.

Here are three examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item Defined</th>
<th>Being Defined</th>
<th>Broad Category</th>
<th>Distinguishing Features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A howdah</td>
<td>is a covered seat</td>
<td>for riding on the back of an elephant or a camel.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A voiceprint</td>
<td>is a graphical record</td>
<td>of a person’s voice characteristics.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To parboil</td>
<td>is to boil meat, vegetables, or fruits</td>
<td>until they are partially cooked.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Writing a good essential definition requires careful thought; you must establish and include the distinguishing features of any essential definition.

**Limitations of Essential Definitions**
Essential definitions have certain built-in limitations. Because of their brevity, they often cannot do full justice to abstract terms such as love, jealousy, or power. Problems also arise with terms that have several settled meanings. To explain jam adequately, you’d need at least three essential definitions:

1. a closely packed crowd;
2. preserves; and,
3. a difficult situation.

But despite these limitations, an essential definition can be useful by itself or as part of a longer definition. Writers often build an extended definition around an essential definition.

**Pitfalls in Preparing Essential Definitions**
When you prepare an essential definition, guard against these flaws:

- **Circular Definition**: Do not define a term by repeating it or changing its form slightly. Repress circularity and provide the proper insight by choosing terms the reader can relate to.
- **Overly Broad Definition**: Shy away from definitions that embrace too much territory; be precise!
- Overly Narrow Definition  Don’t hem in your definition too closely, either.
- Omission of Main Category  Avoid using “is where” or “Is when” instead of naming the main category.

(exercises, page 199)

Extended Definitions
Sometimes it’s necessary to go beyond an essential definition and write a paragraph or whole paper explaining a term. New technical, social, and economic terms often require extended definitions. Terms with differing meanings also frequently require extended definitions. Furthermore, extended definition is crucial to interpretation of the law, as we see when courts clarify the meaning of concepts such as obscenity.

Extended definitions are not merely academic exercises; they are fundamental to your career and your life. Additionally, all of us are concerned with the definition of our basic rights as citizens.

Extended definitions are montages of other methods of development—narration, description, process analysis, illustration, classification, comparison, and cause and effect. Often they also define by negation: explaining what a term does not mean.

Ethical Issues
How we define can have devastating consequences. For centuries, the practice of defining Africans as “subhuman” helped justify the slave trade and slavery. During the 1930s and the early 1940s, labeling Jews as “vermin” was used to fuel the attempt to exterminate them both in Nazi Germany and in much of Western Europe. Even in the absence of malice, definition can have far-reaching effects, both good and bad. For instance, a change in the federal definition of “poverty” can increase or decrease by millions the number of individuals and households eligible for benefits such as Medicaid. Although the consequences of your writing won’t approach those of the above examples, you will nevertheless need to think about possible ethical implications. Addressing the following questions will help you do this.

- Have I carefully evaluated all of the features of my definition?  In clarifying what constitutes “excessive force” by the police, it would be unfair to include the reasonable means necessary to subdue a highly dangerous suspect.
- Have I slanted my definition to reflect some prejudice?  Let’s say you are opposed to casino gambling and you are defining “gambling addicts.”  The paper should focus on those who spend an excessive amount of time in casinos, bet and often lose large sums of money, and in so doing neglect family, financial, and personal obligations.  It would be unfair to include those who visit casinos occasionally and strictly limit their losses.
Have I avoided unnecessary connotations that might be harmful? A definition of teenagers that overemphasized their swift changes in mood might be unfair, perhaps even harmful, since it may influence the reactions of readers.

**Writing an Extended Definition**

**Planning and Drafting the Extended Definition**

In choosing your topic, pick an abstract term or one that is concrete but unfamiliar to your reader. Use one of the strategies on pages 31-38 to unearth promising topics. Then answer these questions about them:

- Which topic holds the most promise? Why
- What purpose will guide my writing? To clarify a technical or specialized concept? To show what the term means to me? To persuade the reader to adopt my attitude toward it? To discuss some neglected facet of it?
- For what audience should I write?

Here’s a helpful process to follow as you think your definition through. First, select a clear example that illustrates what you wish to define: the United States could exemplify democracy. Then brainstorm to uncover major identifying characteristics. For democracy, your list might include majority rule, free elections, a separately elected chief executive, and basic human rights. Next, test these characteristics against other legitimate examples and retain only the characteristics that apply. Britain is clearly a democracy but doesn’t have a separately elected chief executive. Finally, test the unfolding definition against a clear counter-example, perhaps the People’s Republic of China. If the definition fits the example, something is wrong.

Now evaluate what methods you might use to develop your definition. Each method has its own set of special strengths, as the following list shows:

- **Narration:** Tracing the history of a new development or the changing meaning of a term (the birth of the Internet).
- **Description:** pointing out interesting or important features of a device, an event, or an individual (a blizzard).
- **Process:** Explaining what a device does or how it is used, how a procedure is carried out, or how a natural event takes place (an earthquake).
- **Illustration:** Tracing changes in meaning and defining abstract terms by providing examples (tyranny).
- **Classification:** Pointing out the different categories into which an item or an event can be grouped (types of romantic comedies).
- **Comparison:** Distinguishing between an unfamiliar or a familiar term (a terrorist as distinguished from a soldier).
- **Cause and Effect:** Explaining the origins and consequences of events, conditions, problems, and attitudes (disease defined by its causes).
- Negation: Placing limitations on conditions and events and correcting popular misconceptions (why liberty isn’t anarchy).

Examine your topic in light of this listing and select the methods of development that seem most promising. Don’t hesitate to use a method for some purpose not mentioned in this list. If you can think of a comparison that will help your reader understand some abstract term, use it!

Chart the methods of development you will use, and then brainstorm each method in turn to gather the details that will inform your reader. When you have finished, look every thing over, rearrange the details as necessary, add any new ones you think of, and prepare a revised chart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narration</th>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Negation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beginning American Democracy</td>
<td>Types of democracy</td>
<td>Election Process</td>
<td>Not democracies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First supporting detail</td>
<td>First supporting detail</td>
<td>First supporting detail</td>
<td>First supporting detail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forming a constitutional committee</td>
<td>Parliamentary democracy: England</td>
<td>Initial exploration</td>
<td>Single party states: the former Soviet Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second supporting detail</td>
<td>Second supporting detail</td>
<td>Second supporting detail</td>
<td>Second supporting detail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drafting a constitution</td>
<td>Independent presidency: US</td>
<td>Fundraising</td>
<td>Controlled elections: Egypt</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Definition papers can begin in various ways. If you are defining a term with no agreed-upon meaning (for example, conservatism), you might note some differing views of it and then state your own. If the term reflects some new social, political, economic, or technological development (such as wireless Internet), you might mention the events that brought it into being. A colloquial or slang term often lends itself nicely to an attention-getting opener. A paper defining chutzpah might begin by illustrating the brash behavior of someone with this trait. Often an introduction includes a short definition, perhaps taken from a dictionary. (If you do use a dictionary, don’t forget to cite the source, using the full name of the dictionary). Draw on a dictionary definition only as a last resort unless you can doe something creative or clever with the definition.

In writing the body of the paper, present the methods of development in whatever order seems most appropriate.

Definition papers can end, as well as begin, in any number of ways. If you are defining some undesirable condition or event, you might express hope for a speedy solution. If you are reporting on some new development, you might predict its economic or social
impact. Often a summary of your main points is effective. Choose whichever type of ending best supports your main idea.

Revising the Extended Definition
Use the general guidelines in Chapter 4 and these specific questions as you revise your extended definition:

- Are my purpose and audience clear and appropriate?
- If I’ve used an essential definition, does it do what it should and avoid the common pitfalls?
- Are the methods of development suitable for the topic?
- Is the paper organized effectively?
- Are there other factors or examples I need to consider?
- Have I considered appropriate ethical issues?

Suggestions for Writing (pages 196-197)

Critical Edge
Definitions are always social creations. The way various people and communities understand and use any word determines its definition. As a result, writers who use complex words, such as justice, love, and charisma to convey a message may need to consult a number of sources to determine how others have used the words. With their findings of this research in mind, the writers can stake out their own meanings of these words.

When you do this type of research, you must look critically at the definitions of others. Do they accurately reflect the examples you know about? Do they describe examples that do not fit the definition? Are any parts of the definition questionable? Once you have answered these questions, you can then draw on the appropriate elements of the definitions to formulate your own. You might organize such a paper by developing each definition in a separate section, first presenting it in detail and then pointing out its strengths and weaknesses. In the final section you could offer your own definition and support it with your reasoning and suitable examples.

Do not forget to cite your sources accurately to avoid any difficulties with plagiarism!

Writing a Definition

Plan:
- Identify your topic, establish your audience, and identify your purpose.

Brainstorm distinguishing characteristics, examples, examples and characteristics excluded; read, talk to others about the term; observe its uses.

Create a table or a chart of your definition with key characteristics, examples, and exclusions.

Create a plan of organization or organize your table; organization may reflect strategies used or be by key defining characteristics.

Develop a rough draft
- The introduction introduces the term, the reason for the definition, and its dominant characteristic.
- The body presents distinctive defining characteristics.
- The conclusion may summarize the main point, call for action, predict an outcome, and/or stress its importance.

Revise.
Gather reader responses; discuss these with others; test the definition against many examples; check for information which is too general, too narrow, or circular.
- Do the defining characteristics fit?
- Add needed traits or examples.
- Cut unneeded elements.
- Test to make certain that the definition is complete and follows a clear pattern.
- Test for ethics.

Proofread!