

WR115: The Definition Essay (Paper 2)



What Is a Definition Essay?

A definition essay defines a word, term, or concept in depth by providing a personal commentary on what the specific subject means. The definition essay provides a personal, extended definition of such terms by linking or comparing the term to a previous definition (or "dictionary definition") and by illustrating how that term should be applied.

- Most physical objects (such as *trees*, *pencils*, or *chairs*) have a definition about which most people agree. These objects all have specific physical properties that most people can agree on through the use of their physical senses. They are NOT good choices for this assignment.
- Most abstract terms (such as *love*, *pain*, or *patriotism*) have different meanings for different individuals since such terms play on people's feelings more than their physical senses. These are the types of objects that will make the best choices for this assignment.

The definition essay provides a personal, extended definition of an object or concept by linking or comparing the term to a previous definition and by illustrating how that term should be applied.

Getting Started

1. Select a subject carefully.
2. Since such essays are personal in nature, select your subject based on your own need to clarify the term.
 - a. For example, if you feel that the word *marriage* should be defined in a limited manner, that term would make a good subject for a definition essay.
 - b. Perhaps as a parent, you want to define what the term *discipline* means from your point of view.
3. Select a term or subject that you know well enough so that you can provide specific examples to illustrate your definition.
 - a. For example, if you aren't familiar with the term *platonic love*, don't attempt to define it in an extended essay.
 - b. The subject of the essay must be familiar enough to you that you can readily supply specific examples.
4. Don't select a subject either too broad or too narrow to fit the parameters of your essay.
 - a. For example, the word *hat* may be too narrow for you to define in an extended essay.
 - b. On the other hand, the term *love* may be too broad or general since pinning it down to a single definition is very difficult, even for one person (we all love our spouses, our parents, our children in different ways—so one definition of *love* isn't "good enough" for even one person's experiences).
5. Make sure that you have a good, specific thesis that tells readers just how you will define the term.
6. Use good, specific examples (think sensory descriptions) to illustrate each point you make in the paper. Examples allow readers to visualize how the definition can be applied.

7. Provide good transitions to link all parts of the essay.
8. Have a good conclusion that brings the parts of the definition together and leaves readers with an image of how the definition is applied.
9. Proofread carefully.
10. Have a topic chosen by Thursday, February 9. Topics CAN NOT BE CHANGED after 10:45 am on February 9. There will be no exceptions.
11. Students will be responsible for typing a short paragraph (3 to 5 sentences) that clearly explains the topic and why they chose it. I will be collecting this work at the end of class—students will not be given more than 20 minutes of class time to type and/or print out this assignment, so students SHOULD have at least the "thinking work" completed before class begins.
12. Have a fully-written draft of your paper, typed, available at the START of class on Tuesday, February 14. This should be 1.5 pages long at minimum.

Notes & Additional Resources

Much of this assignment sheet is taken from the Online Writing Lab at Northland Community & Technical College in Minnesota. The link to their assignment can be accessed below:

<http://www.northland.cc.mn.us/owl/doing%20the%20definition%20essay.htm>

Northland Community & Technical College also provides a sample definition essay at the following link:

<http://www.northland.cc.mn.us/owl/Definition%20essay.htm>

Purdue University's OWL offers some great information on expository essays. Your definition essay IS an expository essay, so the advice they offer at this link may help you to piece together a better structure for your essay:

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/685/02/>

The comic at the top of the page was created by Drew at www.toothpastefordinner.com.