

## Tactics of Definition

Whether you are writing an extended definition or a brief one, you can use the following tactics to support your version of a word's meaning. The list below offers definitions and examples of each tactic. Tactics that are closely related or easily confused are grouped together, with explanatory notes after each group.

How might you use the tactics? Since not all tactics will work for all terms in all contexts, you can select a few tactics that seem particularly appropriate for the term you are trying to define. Alternatively, you can create a list of definitions of a word or term using all of the tactics and then pick the ones that work best. If you memorize five or six of these tactics, you will find them useful as tools for generating definitions when you write papers or write essay exams for other classes. Of course, the "best" tactic to use in any given case depends upon the needs and interests of your intended audience.

### Could You Use Another Term?

#### 1. Synonym

Provide a roughly equivalent word or phrase

*altruism or self-sacrifice*

*productivity or output*

To present a synonym that helps to define your term, try to find a word your reader already knows. Notice that in these cases the terms *self-sacrifice* and *output* are more transparent (you can see their parts) and perhaps better-understood terms than *altruism* or *productivity*. As a result, the synonym helps the reader grasp the meanings of *altruism* and *productivity*.

#### 2. Contrast with Close Terms

Use this tactic to point out differences between your term and a word someone might think is a synonym.

*Frugality is not quite the same as parsimony, though the two are sometimes confused.*

*A sousaphone differs from the standard tuba in having a large bell, which enables it to make louder sounds.*

*"Consent" is not the same as approval. That is, when we speak about a decision being made "with the consent of the governed," we do not necessarily mean that everyone thought it was a good idea. It may have been a decision for which there was little active support, but*

*against which there was little opposition, or a decision that no one really wanted, but that everyone recognized was better than an even less palatable alternative.<sup>1</sup>*

This tactic is particularly effective if your word is frequently confused with other terms.

### **3. Negation**

Define by specifying what your term does not include. Instead of giving examples, give exceptions or list features that may be found in similar concepts but are not included in your term. You may even map out the boundaries around your concept by identifying a variety of neighboring, but different, concepts.

*Communitarianism is neither a form of liberalism nor a form of conservatism.*

*One of the forerunners of the modern piano, the harpsichord has a keyboard and strings laid horizontally*

*A dialect is a social or regional form of a language. A dialect differs from slang, in that slang refers to informal terms and usages that are not generally accepted in the standard dialect. It differs from jargon in that the latter term can refer to the technical language used by specialists in a field, such as music, medicine, or law.*

**Note:** All three of these tactics require you to think carefully about what your audience already knows or believes. To define a word or term using a synonym, you must be careful to choose a synonym with which your reader is already familiar rather than another word or term that must be defined. (It doesn't help an audience unfamiliar with mathematical terminology to say that the word "sagitta" means the same thing as "the versed sine.") When you define using negation, you are usually writing to an audience that is more familiar with a neighboring concept than your term. (Since liberalism and conservatism are probably terms your audience knows, it makes sense to bring them up in a definition of communitarianism, an unfamiliar concept.) In definitions that contrast close terms, the audience should be familiar with all of the terms you provide since the goal in such cases is to eliminate potential confusion.

## **Is the Object or Concept Denoted by Your Term Like Anything Else?**

### **4. Comparison**

Find an analogy with a concept, object, or process that is more familiar to your audience. The comparison can be partial; that is, your term may be like one thing in one respect, like something else in another respect.

*Dust devils are very small tornadoes.*

*Gobbledygook, like pig-Latin, is a coded secret language used by children.*

## 5. Metaphor

Find an interesting resemblance between your concept and some other concept or category. Although all tactics of definition can suggest evaluation, this tactic is often used to express an attitude or judgment—contemptuous, admiring, or anything in between. (Note that we are using the word *metaphor* here as a cover term, including both metaphors and similes; similes are types of metaphors that use the words “like” or “as” to point out resemblances.) This tactic is the one that is most obviously an argument in and of itself, witness Gore Vidal’s colorful description of the Pentagon as resembling, in function, “a wasps’ nest aswarm” (6).

*The Fourth of July is our national birthday party.*

*Background music is like bubblegum for the ears.*

*The stock market in the 1990s was like a raging bull.*

**Note:** The major difference between comparisons and metaphors is that the former point out literal similarities while the latter point out figurative similarities. Saying that whippets resemble half-sized greyhounds presents your reader with a literal comparison; the whippet shares concrete, physical characteristics of a greyhound, although there is a difference in size. By contrast, saying whippets are the Porsches of the dog world offers a figurative comparison. Unlike a Porsche, a whippet is not made of metal, is not constructed in a factory, and does not run on gasoline, but like a Porsche, a whippet is small and speedy. Since a metaphor is a figurative comparison, it can easily include shades of meaning meant to sway a reader’s judgment. Thus the Porsche metaphor can suggest that a whippet is a particularly elegant pet or that ownership of a whippet confers a certain status. Similarly, if your purpose is to persuade your audience that whippets’ characteristic speed is an excellent trait, comparing them to Porsches would be effective; saying they resemble hyperactive toddlers would probably have the opposite effect.

## Where Does Your Term Fit?

### 6. Genus/Difference

Name the genus, or category, the concept belongs in, selecting a category your audience will recognize.

*Performance art is a kind of live theatrical production.*

Then choose the striking characteristics that make your term different from the others.

*However, performance art differs from mainstream theater in several ways, including a tendency to reject the conventions of theater by selecting or creating locations outside of*

*traditional theatrical space and by erasing the boundaries between "audience" and "performer/artist."*

Genus/Difference definitions are commonly found in dictionaries and reference works, so, for many readers, this tactic will fit into their schema of how a definition should be constructed.

## 7. Classification

If your term represents a category of things with several kinds of members, you can identify the members or the subcategories as an early step in your definition.

*There are three basic types of antonyms: absolute, as in the pair "dead/alive"; gradable, where the term is a continuum between the opposites, as with "warm/cool"; and relational, where the terms are opposed within the context of their relationship to each other, like "parent/child" and "landlord/tenant."*

*The courts have defined two kinds of sexual harassment: "quid pro quo" and "hostile environment."*

**Note:** Genus/Difference and Classification definitions are closely related in that both tactics place terms in relation to categories that contain several concepts. It is most appropriate to use a Genus/Difference definition when your reader is more familiar with the larger category to which a term belongs than the specific term you are defining. (For an audience that knows what a daffodil is, you can say "The cantabile is a variety of daffodil that has an orange and red cup-shaped center surrounded by six white petals." A different audience might be more helped by a definition that says, "The cantabile is a white flower with an orange and red center that grows from a bulb and blooms in the spring.") Classification definitions are appropriate when your reader needs to know that your word or term is a category containing a number of smaller concepts or terms. (For example, a daffodil is not a specific flower but a family of flowers that includes trumpet, long-cupped, short-cupped, split-cupped, double, and triandrus daffodils.)

## How is Your Term Used?

### 8. Contrast with Alternative Definitions of the Same Term, or Narrowing Down the Term

Some words have more than one meaning or at least more than one connotation. If your readers are familiar with one meaning of a word, you can use that knowledge to introduce the meaning you are interested in.

*Imagine that you have exerted great effort all day trying to remove a huge rock from your garden. Your muscles ache. You are very tired. In spite of all your efforts, the rock remains unmoved. You will say you worked hard all day. The physicist will say that you have done no work at all! According to the physicist, work is done only when a force causes an object to move some distance (Murphy, qtd. in Hammond 69).*

The word *work* is a case of polysemy: the same word has two different meanings. (The meanings are of course historically related.) This tactic of definition can also serve as an argument in and of itself, when the meanings of a word have markedly different connotations.

*Most of the time, when we hear the word "rhetoric" used today, it refers to bombast, if not to outright lying. "Counsel for the defense will try to dazzle you with rhetoric," the prosecuting attorney tells the jury. "That speech was a lot of high-sounding rhetoric, but the candidate didn't say anything," remarks the political commentator. "Mere rhetoric!" we say about pretty much anything we don't propose to take seriously. In its broader, non-colloquial sense, however, "rhetoric" refers to the art of finding the available means of persuasion in a given situation.*

When you use this tactic, you are pointing the audience to a particular shade of meaning, directing the audience to one definition over another. As a result, this tactic relies heavily on your knowledge of your audience. You must know what definitions your readers are likely to know in order to narrow your term successfully.

## **9. Circumstances of Use or Social Context**

Describe the kind of situation, or perhaps even the social setting, in which this term would arise. Or, by contrast, describe some of the contexts in which it would be appropriate to use it. You can describe hypothetical situations, appropriate and inappropriate, or you can cite actual instances of a term's use.

*Striking union members call anyone who works for the company they are boycotting a "scab."*

*In legal proceedings, the person who brings a suit against another is called the "plaintiff."*

This tactic is valuable if your term is used quite differently by particular groups or in different social contexts.

*One term that is confusing because it is used very differently by the USDA [United States Department of Agriculture] on the one hand and the AKC [American Kennel Club] on the other is the term hobby breeder. The USDA defines a hobby breeder as someone who sells puppies directly to pet stores, but owns no more than three breeding bitches and who grosses less than \$500 per year. USDA hobby breeders do not need to be USDA licensed, so there is no regulation of their facilities or practices except in the rare places where local laws are in place. . . .*

*The confusion arises because serious dog fanciers and breeders use the term hobby breeder in a very different way. For this group, a hobby breeder is someone who usually breeds only one breed (or possibly two), and who has a well-planned breeding program designed to protect and improve the breed. Such breeders usually have only one or two litters a year and may skip some years. . . . They sell puppies directly to individuals whom*

*they first screen to be sure the pup will be well cared for. So if someone tells you she is a "hobby breeder," be sure you find out what she means by the term (Boneham 86-87).*

## 10. Operation

An operational definition is a test, an action, or a rule of thumb by which something qualifies as part of your concept. If something passes the test or results from the action, it will be referred to by your term.

*For our purposes, "family" will mean the nuclear family.*

*"Primary occupation" means the work at which you earn most of your income.*

*In this discussion, "student" will be used for someone formally enrolled in any accredited institution of learning. Our definition therefore excludes children who are being home schooled as well as those sitting in informally on college-level courses.*

Aside from telling your reader what sort of thing you're *not* talking about, operational definitions are useful in avoiding confusion with other usages of your term and in helping you set the limits of your argument.

**Note:** All of these tactics are particularly useful when an audience may bring to your argument definitions that are different from or not relevant to the way you want them to understand a term. Often, writers dealing with terms that have multiple definitions begin either by narrowing down the term or presenting specific contexts for their use of the term, and then go on to present their own operational definition to specify how the term will be used in the document now before the reader.

## Where Does Your Term Come From?

### 11. History

Trace the origin of the concept and its development over time. If your purpose is to cover the many meanings of a single word, this method invites you to show branching or shifting meanings over time.

*At the beginning of the twentieth century, "to surf" meant simply to ride on top of the swells of ocean waves either in a boat or with one's body. By 1955, however, the word specifically applied to riding on top of waves while standing on a surfboard (Oxford English Dictionary, q.v.). A friend who says that he spent last night surfing probably went nowhere near the ocean, as the early 1990s saw the term applied to those who cruise the world wide web looking for information.*

*The meaning of "secretary" has developed from a confidential assistant, a meaning reflected in the root word "secret," to the modern clerical worker.*

The tactic of history traces the evolving meanings of a term for a fuller, clearer definition. Instead of focusing on one historical moment in the term's evolution, this tactic considers the evolution itself. It can also support a detailed definition either by suggesting that the activity or object referenced by the term may have been affected by the term's history (*surfing* suggests rapid, movement along a surface) or by emphasizing the contrast between the term's earlier and current uses (as with *secretary*).

## 12. Etymology

While the preceding tactic focuses on the development of the concept associated with the word, etymology is a matter of taking the word itself apart to show how it was formed from its roots, was combined from other words, or was borrowed in its entirety from another language.

*A pagan was originally a villager or peasant, someone who lived in a village (Latin pagus). Eventually, the term came to mean "civilian," someone who lives in the countryside, in contrast to the Roman soldiers who might be assigned to the area. When the early Christian church used the metaphor of Christians as "soldiers of Christ," they also borrowed the word for civilian, "pagan," to refer to someone who wasn't a Christian (Heller, et al., "pagan").*

*The word "etiquette," French for "ticket" or "small card," originally referred to a card containing instructions for what was expected behavior at court (Morris and Morris 207), a sort of early "cheat sheet" for the socially well connected. It now refers more generally to any more or less formalized and accepted code of behavior, although there is still a tendency to use it to refer to public behavior regarded as "polite" by mainstream society.*

In order to research the etymology of almost any word or term, you must look it up in a dictionary or other reference work. When you do so, you will find that the etymologies of some words are unknown, while the etymologies of others give little insight into their meaning. After researching a word's etymology, you will still need to think carefully about whether this information will enhance your argument. The information presented above about the history of *pagan* might be helpful in a paper discussing Christian attitudes towards non-Christians. In a history of Wicca, for instance, it might be useful in showing how terms applied to non-Christians in Europe were determined by Christian metaphors. The etymology of *etiquette* shows a connection between its origin and its current use. Of course, in exploring the history or etymology of a word, you will be going beyond common knowledge, so you will need to document your sources.

**Note:** It is easy to see why one might give the history of a concept – to show how it has changed due to changing circumstances, to argue it would be appropriate to return to an earlier meaning of the term, or even to show how your use of a term is different from the way another writer uses it. The uses of etymology are less obvious. Sometimes, it simply provides a bit of additional information to the reader, making the argument more memorable. However, etymology can also make a point. A writer who takes a negative view of some legislative actions might find it worthwhile to remark on the etymological connections between the words *senate* and *senile*. More seriously, it is easier

to define poodles credibly as water dogs if one points out that *poodle* comes from German *pudeln*, meaning 'to splash around in the water.'

## What Are the Most Important Attributes of Your Term?

### 13. Description

If the term you are defining refers to something tangible, select the details (sounds, sights, smells, etc.) that make it recognizable.

*An erlenmayer flask is shaped like a cone with a broad base and a narrow neck.*

*American roast coffee beans are usually light to medium brown and dry. Coffee brewed from these beans is usually light in flavor. French roast beans, on the contrary, are roasted until they are very dark brown and oily, the result of the oil in the beans coming to the surface during the roasting process. The resulting coffee generally has a very strong flavor.*

Descriptions are often fairly short, like those above. However, in some cases, a longer description is useful, as in the example below, where a writer uses detail to define the "true-true" Carnival of Trinidad and Tobago. She begins by presenting Carnival as a period of celebration before Lent, then uses the tactic of Narrowing Down the Term to establish that she is not talking merely about a parade or a formalized pre-Lenten celebration. The tactic of Description is brought into play to present the "true-true" Carnival as unique.

*Carnival, an annual mass of confusion preceding Lent, is a non-stop, sleepless, multi-faceted bacchanal. To the uninitiated, it appears to be a bunch of unnecessary lawlessness. They are half right: it is lawlessness, but of the most necessary variety. Today, many islands throughout the Caribbean have some "parade" they call Carnival, and there is even a Carnival circuit throughout North America from May to October. However, they cannot compare to Trinidad and Tobago's (T&T) "true-true" Carnival.*

*Carnival, culminating with Mas, is all about "leggo" (let go). The scene is set. Nothing is beyond you. It is the ultimate existential experience. You are free to go beyond yourself, dance, shout, whistle, drink, sweat, fornicate, and eat. Almost any act, barring murder or serious injury to another, is allowed. You have been partying for three days non-stop. You are tired to the point of exhaustion, but a mix of suddenly bearable sun, over-friendly people, a Carib (the local beer), Vat 19 (the local rum), or both, along with pulsating rhythms blaring out of 30 speakers lifts you off the road and transports you to a place outside yourself. A place where not to act ridiculous is frowned upon and generally not tolerated. That grandmother dancing next to you with the yellow tights, gold lame bikini top, gold foil trident in her left hand, Carib beer wrapped in a rag in her right hand, looks quite tame compared to some of the other things you will see (adapted from Shields, 1-2.).*



## 14. Example(s)

Select members or specific instances of the group represented by your term. Such examples can also be expanded by other modes like description or comparison.

*An idiom is an expression that cannot be understood from the meanings of the individual words, like "hail mary" and "throw in the towel." You can know what throwing is, and what a towel is, without necessarily knowing that "to throw in the towel" means to give up.*

While prototypical examples (see "Prototypes and Definitions," pp. 64-65) are often the most useful ones, it is sometimes helpful to point out the range of examples covered by your term. This can be done by noting both prototypical and marginal examples.

*When most people think of a computer, they probably envision a Dell laptop or an iMac desktop machine. But your bathroom scale is also a kind of computer.*

As with all the tactics of definition, examples should be used judiciously. Exemplification is not a substitute for defining a term: you have not, for example, succeeded in defining "the Olympic games" if you simply list athletic events that take place during the Olympic games.

**Note:** Using the tactics of description and example to define a term gives you the opportunity to provide lots of rich and memorable details. However, you must be careful to pick the details that will be most useful to your audience. If you are defining the term "Barbie doll" for an audience that has never seen such a doll, your long, clever description of the doll's appearance will be helpful; for readers who are very familiar with this doll, a lengthy description may be irrelevant and tiresome. Similarly, naming several examples of comic strips for an audience interested in learning about the development of the comics page would be appropriate, but such a list would be annoying to an audience reading about the evolution of *Doonesbury*.

## How Does Your Term Work?

### 15. Analysis by Parts

If your term defines a concept or object that is made up of a number of different features or elements, specify those features or elements.

*The modern pentathlon comprises the following events: running, swimming, horseback riding, pistol shooting, and fencing.*

*A traditional sentence consists of a subject and a predicate.*

## 16. Process

If your term refers to a method or procedure, tell how it is done. You might, for example, detail the steps chronologically.

*Decoupage is the technique of decorating a surface with cutouts.*

*Revising a paper is a process with many stages. Most handbooks suggest that it begins most effectively with an examination to see if the paper works at a general level—whether the paper serves its purpose, whether the argument is likely to be effective for the intended audience—and then moves on to progressively more detailed questions, such as whether the organization makes sense, and finally to revision on the level of the sentence. The kind of copyediting task involved in checking for spelling and punctuation is usually best left for last.*

The following example shows how a definition can serve as a powerful argument. In 1999 drivers were offered the option of placing a sticker on their cars indicating that they did not as a rule drive in the early morning hours. Police, seeing a stickered car on the road at those hours, could stop the car, with the assumption that it had been stolen. A University of Maryland student, a former police officer, used a process definition as part of an argument against the sticker program. (Notice also the author's establishment of ethos and his use of a brief comparison definition, relying on the audience's schemas from a television program, in the second sentence of this segment.)

*When I was in the police academy, we practiced the stolen car traffic stop, called a high-risk or felony traffic stop. This is the stuff from COPS. This type of stop involves at least two (usually more) officers drawing their weapons on the assumed stolen car and ordering the driver out. The driver has to roll down the window and open the door from the outside and then must back up slowly towards the officers.*

*When the driver reaches the police car, the officer cuffs him or her and places them in the back of the police cruiser while their identity is verified. . . .*

*If officers truly treat a car as if it is stolen and value their own safety, they should do it the usual high-risk way, and this sounds like an awful lot to contend with for a late-night run to Taco Bell (Kinikin, 4).*

**Note:** Analysis by parts and process definitions often go hand-in-hand. In order to explain a method or procedure, you will likely need to break it down into its component parts. Similarly, when you analyze a concept's different features and elements, you may find yourself explaining how these parts relate to each other in order to perform a function. As with all definitions you write, be sure to consider what previous knowledge your audience brings to the subject matter to determine whether these tactics will be effective. If a reader doesn't know what cutouts are, then the process definition of *decoupage* offered above is not helpful; students who don't know the terms *subject* and *predicate* will have no clear idea of what a *traditional sentence* is after reading the analysis by parts presented here.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>This example owes much to Donald E. Walker, *The Effective Administrator*. For a fuller treatment of the distinction between consent and approval, see Walker, p. 17.

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