

## CHAPTER 9

# Definition

A: Single-Sentence Definitions

B: The Definition Paragraph

To **define** is to explain clearly what a word or term means.

As you write, you will sometimes find it necessary to explain words or terms that you suspect your reader may not know. For example, *net profit* is the profit remaining after all deductions have been taken; a *bonsai* is a dwarfed, ornamentally shaped tree. Such terms can often be defined in just a few carefully chosen words. However, other terms—like *courage*, *racism*, or *a good marriage*—are more difficult to define. They will test your ability to explain them clearly so that your reader knows exactly what you mean when you use them in your writing. They may require an entire paragraph for a complete and thorough definition.

In this chapter, you will learn to write one-sentence definitions and then whole paragraphs of definition. The skill of defining clearly will be useful in such courses as psychology, business, the sciences, history, and English.

### A. Single-Sentence Definitions

There are many ways to define a word or term. Three basic ways are **definition by synonym**, **definition by class**, and **definition by negation**.

#### Definition by Synonym

The simplest way to define a term is to supply a **synonym**, a word that means the same thing. A good synonym definition always uses an easier and more familiar word than the one being defined.

1. *Gregarious* means *sociable*.
2. *To procrastinate* means *to postpone needlessly*.
3. *A wraith* is a *ghost* or *phantom*.
4. *Adroitly* means *skillfully*.

Although you may not have known the words *gregarious*, *procrastination*, *wraith*, and *adroitly* before, the synonym definitions make it very clear what they mean.

A synonym should usually be the same part of speech as the word being defined, so it could be used as a substitute. *Gregarious* and *sociable* are both adjectives; *to procrastinate* and *to postpone* are verb forms; *wraith*, *ghost*, and *phantom* are nouns; *adroitly* and *skillfully* are adverbs.

5. Quarterback Peyton Manning *adroitly* moved his team up the field.
6. Quarterback Peyton Manning *skillfully* moved his team up the field.

- In this sentence *skillfully* can be substituted for *adroitly*.

Unfortunately, it is not always possible to come up with a good synonym definition.

### Definition by Class

The **class** definition is the one most often required in college and formal writing—in examinations, papers, and reports.

The class definition has two parts. First, the writer places the word to be defined into the larger **category**, or **class**, to which it belongs.

7. *Lemonade* is a *drink*.
8. An *orphan* is a *child*.
9. A *dictatorship* is a *form of government*.

Second, the writer provides the **distinguishing characteristics** or **details** that make this person, object, or idea *different* from all others in that category. What the reader wants to know is what *kind* of drink is lemonade? What *specific* type of child is an orphan? What *particular* form of government is a dictatorship?

#### ESL TIP

ESL students may require additional explanation of relative clauses. Refer them to Chapters 22 and 28 for review.

10. *Lemonade* is a drink *made of lemons, sugar, and water*.
11. An *orphan* is a child *without living parents*.
12. A *dictatorship* is a form of government *in which one person has absolute control over his or her subjects*.



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Here is a class definition of the device pictured:  
*The Play Pump is a water pump that operates when children play on a merry-go-round, thus cheaply bringing water to poor communities in Africa.*

Think of class definitions as if they were in chart form:

#### LEARNING STYLES TIP

Visual learners will understand and write class definitions more easily if they break them down in a chart like this.

Word	Category or Class	Distinguishing Facts or Details
lemonade	drink	made of lemons, sugar, and water
orphan	child	without living parents
dictatorship	form of government	one person has absolute control over his or her subjects

When you write a class definition, be careful not to place the word or term in too broad or vague a category. For instance, saying that lemonade is a *food* or that an orphan is a *person* will make your job of zeroing in on a distinguishing detail more difficult.

Besides making the category or class as limited as possible, be sure to make your distinguishing facts as specific and exact as you can. Saying that lemonade is a drink *made with water* or that an orphan is a child *who has lost family members* is not specific enough to give your reader an accurate definition.

### Definition by Negation

A definition by **negation** means that the writer first says what something is not, and then says what it is.

13. A *good parent* does not just feed and clothe a child but loves, accepts, and supports that child for who he or she is.
14. *College* is not just a place to have a good time but a place to grow intellectually and emotionally.
15. *Liberty* does not mean having the right to do whatever you please but carries the obligation to respect the rights of others.

Definitions by negation are extremely helpful when you think that the reader has a preconceived idea about the word you wish to define. You say that *it is not* what the reader thought, but that *it is* something else entirely.

### PRACTICE 1

Write a one-sentence definition by **synonym** for each of the following terms. Remember, the synonym should be more familiar than the term being defined.

#### TEACHING AND READING TIP

To learn the meanings of words they don't know, students should have a good dictionary nearby while reading and writing. Computer users might try <http://dictionary.reference.com>.

1. *irate*: To be irate is to be angry.

2. *to elude*: To elude someone is to keep away from him or her.

3. *pragmatic*: To be pragmatic is to be practical.

4. *fiasco*: A fiasco is a disaster.

5. *elated*: To be elated is to be overjoyed.

### PRACTICE 2

Here are five **class definitions**. Circle the category and underline the distinguishing characteristics in each. You may find it helpful to make a chart.

#### TEACHING TIP

Practices 2 and 3 work well in class. Create sample class definitions on the board, perhaps in three columns: *term*, *class*, and *differentiating detail*.

1. A *haiku* is a japanese poem that has seventeen syllables.

2. *Plagiarism* is (stealing writing or ideas) that are not one's own.

3. A *homer* is a (referee) who unconsciously favors the home team.

4. An *ophthalmologist* is a (doctor) who specializes in diseases of the eye.

5. The *tango* is a (ballroom dance) that originated in Latin America and is in 2/4 or 4/4 time.

### PRACTICE 3

Define the following words by **class definition**. You may find it helpful to use this form:

"A \_\_\_\_\_ is a \_\_\_\_\_  
(noun) (class or category)  
that \_\_\_\_\_."  
(distinguishing characteristic)

#### TEACHING TIP

Point out that effective definitions include exact language. For more on this topic, see Chapter 23.

1. *hamburger*: A hamburger is a sandwich that consists of a split bun and a ground beef patty.

2. *bikini*: A bikini is a two-piece swimsuit that is very scanty.