occupies herself "naming the classes of people": most "colored people" are on the bottom; "next to them—not above, just away from—are the white trash"; and so on. Mrs. Turpin puzzles about the exceptions to her system—the black dentist who owns property and the decent white folks who have lost their money—but for the most part, she is certain about her system and her place in it. In the doctor's waiting room, she sizes up the other patients, placing them in their appropriate classes. But her internal and external dialogue reveals the ironies and inconsistencies in her rigid system. Self-satisfied, pleased that Jesus is on her side, she is not prepared for the book on human development that is thrown at her or the events that follow—the transparent flattery of the black workers, her cleaning of the pig parlor, and, finally, her vision of the highway to heaven that reveals her real place in God's hierarchy.

CHAPTER 5

DEFINITION

As a writer, both in and out of college, you're likely to spend a good deal of time writing definitions. In an astronomy class, you may be asked to explain what the Doppler effect is or what a white dwarf star is. In a literature class, you may be asked to define a sonnet and identify its different forms. If you become an engineer, you may write to define problems your company proposes to solve or to define a new product your company has developed. If you become a business executive, you may have to write a brochure to describe a new service your company offers or to draft a letter that defines the company's policy on credit applications.

Writers use definitions to establish boundaries, to show the essential nature of something, and to explain the special qualities that identify a purpose, place, object, or concept and distinguish it from others similar to it. Writers often write extended definitions—definitions that go beyond the one-sentence or one-paragraph explanations that you find in a dictionary or encyclopedia—to expand on and examine the

essential qualities of a policy, an event, a group, or a trend. Sometimes an extended definition becomes an entire book. Some books are written to define the good life; others are written to define the ideal university or the best kind of government. In fact, many of the books on any current nonfiction best-seller list are primarily definitions. The essays in this chapter of *The River Reader* are all extended definitions.

PURPOSE

When you write, you can use definitions in several ways. For instance, you can define to *point out the special nature* of something. You may want to show the special flavor of San Francisco that makes it different from other major cities in the world, or you may want to describe the unique features that make the Macintosh computer different from other personal computers.

You can also define to *explain*. In an essay about cross-country skiing, you might want to show your readers what the sport is like and point out why it's less hazardous and less expensive than downhill skiing but better exercise. You might also define to *entertain*—to describe the essence of what it means to be a "good old boy," for instance. Often you define to *inform;* that is what you are doing in college papers when you write about West Virginia folk art or postmodern architecture. Often you write to *establish a standard,* perhaps for a good exercise program, a workable environmental policy, or even the ideal pair of running shoes. Notice that when you define to set a standard, you may also be defining to *persuade,* to convince your reader to accept the ideal you describe. Many definitions are essentially arguments.

Sometimes you may even write to *define yourself.* That is what you are doing when you write an autobiographical statement for a college admissions officer or a scholarship committee, or when you write a job application letter. You hope to give your readers the special information that will distinguish you from all other candidates. When that is your task, you'll profit by knowing the common strategies for defining and by recognizing how other writers have used them.

AUDIENCE

When you're going to use definition in your writing, you can benefit by thinking ahead of time about what your readers expect from you. Why are they reading, and what questions will they want you to answer? You can't anticipate all their questions, but you should plan on responding to at least two kinds of queries.

First, your readers are likely to ask, "What distinguishes what you're writing about? What's typical or different about it? How do I know when I see one?" For example, if you were writing about the Olympic Games, your readers would perhaps want to know the difference between today's Olympic Games and the original games in ancient Greece. With a little research, you could tell them about several major differences.

Second, for more complex topics you should expect that your readers will also ask, "What is the basic character or the essential nature of what you're writing about? What do you mean when you say 'alternative medicine,' 'Marxist theory,' or 'white-collar crime'?" Answering questions such as these is more difficult; but if you're going to use terms like these in an essay, you have an obligation to define them, using as many strategies as you need to clarify your terms. To define white-collar crime, for instance, you could specify that it is nonviolent, is likely to happen within businesses, and involves illegal manipulation of funds or privileged information. You should also strengthen your definition by giving examples that your readers might be familiar with.

STRATEGIES

You can choose from several strategies for defining, using them singly or in combination. A favorite strategy we all use is *giving examples,* something we do naturally when we point to a special automobile we like or show a child a picture of a raccoon in a picture book. Writers use the same method when they describe a scene, create a visual image, or cite a specific instance of something.

Every author in this chapter uses an abundance of examples. Kathleen Norris relies on examples to illustrate what she means by "gossip." Diane Ackerman introduces a wealth of examples from several societies to make her point that to some extent the way people experience pain is cultural.

You can define by *analyzing qualities* to emphasize what specific traits distinguish the person or thing you're defining. When you use this strategy for people, you focus on certain qualities or behaviors that reveal that individual's personality and character. James Gleick uses this strategy to illustrate how people try to complete multiple tasks in smaller and smaller periods of time. In the opening paragraph of "Pain," Ackerman shows what she calls T. E. Lawrence's "quintessential machismo" by describing him holding his hand in a candle flame.

A similar strategy is *attributing characteristics*. Kathleen Norris uses this strategy when she says that telling stories is characteristic of small towns.

Another strategy is *defining negatively*. In "A Word's Meaning Can Often Depend on Who Says It," Gloria Naylor explains how the black community has transformed a negative word into a complex word that signifies a variety of meanings.

Another way to define is by *using analogies*. Joan Didion uses the "wagon-train morality" to create an analogy to illustrate what she means by the basic social code.

You can also define by *showing function*. Often the most important feature about an object, agency, or institution is what it does. The element of function figures centrally in Toni Cade Bambara's story as Miss Moore tries to teach her students the meaning of the word *cost*.

COMBINING STRATEGIES

Even when you're writing an essay that is primarily an exercise in definition, you may want to do as professional writers often do and bring in other strategies, perhaps narration or argument or process analysis. For instance, in "Stone Soup" (pages 453 to 462), Barbara Kingsolver provides a definition of family and then argues that we need an expanded definition.

Some writers also combine definition with narration and description. In "The Myth of the Latin Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named María" (pages 60 to 67), Judith Ortiz Cofer challenges stereotypes to define the true character of Hispanic women. In "Stone Soup" (pages 453 to 462), Barbara Kingsolver uses stories about children as a way of defining a strong family. So you can mix and mingle strategies even though one may dominate. As you read essays in this chapter, and especially as you reread them, try to be conscious of the strategies authors are using. You may find that you can incorporate some of them into your own writing.

DEFINITION

Points to Remember

1. Remember that you are obligated to define key terms that you use in your writing (such as *Marxism, alternative medicine,* or *nontraditional student*).
2. Understand your purpose in defining: to explain, to entertain, to persuade, to set boundaries, or to establish a standard.
3. Understand how writers construct an argument from a definition. For example, by defining the good life or good government, they argue for that kind of life or government.
4. Know the several ways of defining: giving examples, analyzing qualities, attributing characteristics, defining negatively, using analogies, and showing function.
5. Learn to use definition in combination with other strategies, as a basis on which to build an argument, or as supporting evidence.