

JOHNSON COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Development by Definition and Statistics

Definition is a method of restricting, making clear, or identifying the meaning of a word or phrase. Most definitions are given briefly, usually in a sentence or less, and are usually given in the course of fulfilling some other purpose.

However, depending on your purpose, a definition may require a paragraph or even an essay to illustrate clearly the meaning that you intend. Also, when your purpose is to clarify a term or phrase, you may use a variety of techniques.

The definition is used to help clarify meaning for your audience in the following situations:

- a. when you use a term your audience may not know,
- b. when a term has several possible meanings,
- c. when the understanding of a term may be too vague or indefinite without further explanation,
- d. when you want your audience to be aware that you are using a term which holds a particular technical or professional meaning.

Shorter definitions are called "simple" or "informal" definitions. The following are some of the most common methods of **informal definitions**:

1. Defining by synonym is probably the most-often used procedure for an informal definition. You must remember, though, that a synonym cannot be precise, because very few words in the language mean exactly the same thing. For example, the word *parsimony* can mean "excessive frugality," "extreme economy," "stinginess" and "tightfistedness." Each of these words has its own connotations.

Note:

- 1) Do not use another form of the word being defined in the word substitution; example--Democracy is a democratic form of government.
- 2) Use a thesaurus for synonyms, but remember that connotations of words prevent them from being precise synonyms.
- 3) Make sure the synonym chosen is a familiar term to the audience.

2. Defining by example is also used for informal definitions. For instance, you could say, "Parsimony is illustrated by Silas Marner's keeping his money in a pot below the floorboards of his shack," and people will conjure up an image of Eliot's famous character hoarding his gold. Or

you could say, "Blue is the color of the sky." A word of caution, though: be sure that the example is familiar to your readers' experience.

3. Defining by simile or analogy can sometimes be used, but again, you must ensure that the reader understands the comparison. This simile could illustrate the term *parsimony*: "He is as parsimonious as a squirrel hoarding food for a frosty winter."
4. Defining by function or operation is closely related to defining by example, but be aware of the important difference. While example calls for a specific illustration close to the reader's experience, function requires putting the term into a situation and then describing it in operation. The following might serve as a definition by function: "When a person finds himself holding onto his material possessions, especially his money, excessively, then he is being parsimonious."
5. Defining by enumeration means breaking down or listing the parts or aspects of the term. For example, one could define "The Axis" as "Germany, Italy, and Japan during World War II." When attempting to define by enumeration, remember that some terms are too large to enumerate. For example, one cannot define the word *reptile* by attempting to list all of the animals in that class, nor can one define dog by attempting to list the breed of every dog in the world.
6. Defining by negation is often used with positive or affirmative definitions. One of the main purposes of negation is to reject wrong ideas or oversimplified concepts. For example, one could say, "Patriotism is not obeying every law in the land" or "A teacher is not a moralist."
7. Defining by etymology means that the writer traces the history of a word or phrase for the purpose of the definition. Most often, the writer's purpose is to show the change or changes that a word has gone through over a period of years. For example, "The term *bedlam* comes from a corruption of *St. Mary of Bethlehem*, a state lunatic asylum in London since 1547; thus, *bedlam* means the noise, confusion, and chaos expected from the inhabitants of the asylum and is applied to everyday life."

The **formal definition** has three steps: the term, the class or genus, and the differentia. The term to be defined is put into its genus or class and the differentia distinguishes between the word to be defined and all the other members of its class.

The definition should identify essential qualities and limit the term's meaning.

<u>Term to be defined</u>	<u>Genus</u>	<u>Differentia</u>
literature	[is] the written record of valuable thought	having other than merely practical purposes

For example, if the writer wants to formally define the word *bridge* the word is written in this context: "A bridge is a structure spanning and providing passage over a chasm, river, or other obstacle." The words following the word structure (the term's class) are the differentia between a bridge and all other members of the class.

One might consider this partial definition: A poem is a group of words. What other terms may also be partially defined as "a group of words?" A clause, a phrase, a novel, a letter, and many other things are groups of words, yet these are probably not poems.

The extended definition is used when the formal definition cannot clarify or define a term in one sentence. The extended definition, in most instances, has the formal definition as its first sentence. The rest of the paragraph or essay will then continue the differentia, often using a variety of the informal methods of definition listed above. For example, the formal definition, "A bridge is a structure spanning and providing passage over a chasm, river, or other obstacle," may not satisfy the writer. An extended definition including synonyms, examples, similes, function, enumeration, and negation may be written. Other helpful methods of defining a word are literal comparison and contrast and narration.

The following paragraphs are examples of development by definition.

A Bottle of Placebo, Please

In medicine, a placebo is a substance that contains no preventative or curative abilities for a specific ailment. The effects, if any, on the patient are purely psychological. The origin of the term *placebo* goes back to the Latin *placere*, which meant "to please". The present spelling came from the Roman Catholic Church's office of vespers for the dead. The Church's Medieval Latin liturgy began with *Placebo Domino in regione vivorum* (I shall please the Lord in the land of the living). As time passed, the medical profession adopted the term to apply to medication given merely to humor or "to please" the patient. Obviously, the patient must not know that the medication has no abilities to help the specific problem. Common examples of a placebo are salt tablets and saline injections. If this "medication" is given for dehydration, it is not a placebo. However, if a patient feels better after taking a salt tablet, and the "medication" had no known curative ability other than in the patient's head, then it would become a placebo. Other placebos are the old-time "snake oils" and "elixir," and their modern counterparts bought off of the shelf at the local drug store. These modern nonprescriptive wonder drugs supposedly cure everything from baldness to bunions; however, if a cure is affected, it is usually in the mind of the patient, not in the ingredients of the medicine. Taking a placebo is like taking a vacation after fifty grueling weeks of work. Two weeks in Acapulco should revitalize one's mind and body so that the prospect of facing another fifty weeks at the factory or at the office is not so bad. So it is with a placebo, except one doesn't have to leave town to cure that run-down feeling. A cure could cost only \$2.98 at the drug store. If one buys a bottle of Supertonic, believes the label, which says "Feel great in twelve hours or double your money back," takes the medicine, gets a good night's

sleep, and feels like a million dollars the next morning, then this effect must have been brought on by the tonic. Just because the tonic contains 70% alcohol, 29% water, and 1% concentrate from three exotic herbs from Outer Mongolia is beside the point.

Randy S. Gillington

The Noun *Base*

To military personnel, the word *base* signifies a center of operations for military units. The base usually covers a large area which contains office buildings, a hospital, a commissary, housing units, and recreational facilities for personnel and their dependents. To a chemist, however, a base is a compound which combines with an acid to form a salt. Sodium bicarbonate, present in the blood, is an important base that interacts with acids to maintain the normal pH balance of the blood. Casey Stengel would consider the word *base* as a denotation of one of the four corners of a baseball diamond. To a carpenter, a base would be the foundation on which the rest of the house is built. As one can see, the noun base can have many meanings, depending on the context in which it is used.

Elaine Leiser

Optimism

Optimism is a quality enabling people to take the most hopeful or cheerful view of matters possible. Basically, optimism comes in two forms. One type of optimism occurs when a person finds himself in an unfortunate situation and yet does not let himself become depressed over what has happened. Instead, he looks for what good there was in, or may come out of, the situation. The other kind of optimism is how one looks at the future. Although a job or an automobile may not be all a person wishes them to be, he simply does not quit working or driving. Instead, he hopes that in the future he will obtain a better job or car. Optimism can not only be explained by its occurrence but also by its origins in languages older than American English. The word *optimism* came into the English language from the French word *optimisme*, which derived from the Greek word *optos* (which meant "visual") and the Latin word *optimum* (which meant "best"). The word *optimism* can also be understood by observing people whose attitudes are the opposite of optimistic, that is by looking where there is a lack of optimism. Many people are constantly looking at the bad side of things. They are not optimistic; they are pessimistic.

Clocks

A clock is an instrument that measures and indicates time. Early civilizations constructed devices that indicated time by different angles of the sun; in recent years, time has been measured and indicated by means of pointers moving over a dial. A clock is similar to a calendar that divides a year into months and days; a clock divides a day into hours, minutes, and seconds. A clock is large and ornamental, as opposed to a watch which, although ornamental, is smaller and is worn on a person's body. There are grandfather clocks that stand tall, there are wall clocks, there are table clocks. Clocks have improved greatly over the centuries. The first clocks were sun dials, water clocks, and hour glasses. Today, there are various types of clocks with intricate mechanical and electrical components.

Mary Gonzalez

PRACTICE EXERCISES

- A. Write three topic sentences that put a term to be defined into a class.
- B. Write an extended definition paragraph, using as many informal definition devices as you think necessary.
- C. Write a definition paragraph using one of the methods discussed. Choose from one of the topics below.
1. pornography
 2. style in dressing
 3. boredom
 4. ecstasy
 5. fear
 6. assertiveness
 7. taste
 8. depression
 9. superior student

DEVELOPMENT BY STATISTICS

To develop a paragraph by statistics, think of the topic sentence as a general statement that needs support. Use numerical data to support the controlling idea of the topic sentence. The amount of statistical data used and the length of the paragraph depends on the complexity of the topic.

The effective use of statistics in a well-developed paragraph requires that you as a writer be especially aware of two things. First, the numerical data should be complete and precise. For example, do not say, "About half of the population of X City drinks polluted water." You must be precise by what is meant by "about": Is it 44.9% or 53.1%, or 49%, or what? Second, give the source of information. If the writer's data comes from a published source, then that source should be cited. For example, "The Harris Poll reports that 32% of the registered Republicans feel that former President Nixon should have stayed in China"; or, "U.S. News and World Report states that 16.7% of the American public is oversexed" or, "According to the University of New Mexico's Animal Husbandry Department, 38.2% of the white-faced cattle in Cochise County, Arizona, have the pinkeye." Thus, the writer using statistics should be precise with figures and give the source of the data.

Although the specific use of numbers will vary with individual, specific situations, below are some general conventions to keep in mind:

1. Any number that can be written in two words or less should be spelled out.
2. Conversely, use Arabic figures for any number that requires more than two words.
3. In using numbers with percentage, dollars, degrees, and so forth, one can use either figures or write the number if it is two words or less; however, be consistent (that is, *5%* or *five percent*).

The following paragraphs are examples of development by statistics.

Termite Damage

Subterranean termites are a greater threat to property than tornadoes, hurricanes, and fires combined. According to Terminix International's booklet, Subterranean Termite Control (1977), each year termites strike more American homes and businesses than the combination of tornadoes, hurricanes, and fires. The damage to properties from storms in 1976 was \$200,000,000 (30.8%). In contrast, the damage to properties from termites was \$450,000,000 (69.2%). The number of properties damaged by fires in 1976 was 400,000 (18.2%). On the other hand, the number of properties damaged by termites was 1,800,000 (81.8%).

Jeri Harris

Soft Drinks, Beer, and Litter

In the last fifteen years, United States citizens who are concerned with litter have been losing a battle against the beer and beverage industry. According to Time, back in 1960 Americans drank 95% of the soft drinks and 50% of the beer from refillable bottles. These bottles could be brought back for the deposit money, and they could then be used over and over again. Today, according to the United States Bottlers Association, 79% of packaged beer and two out of three soft drinks are sold in cans and "no deposit, no return" bottles, which are used once and then thrown away. The United States is now using about sixty billion beverage throw-aways per year. These cans and bottles add some nine million tons of trash to the national garbage, in this case located mostly on highways, streets, public parks, and beaches. The Research Triangle Institute of North Carolina reported that in 1969 more than two billion beverage containers found their way to the nation's roadsides. Since then, the yearly totals have reached nearly three billion. Such throwaways account for 20% to 40% of the litter. A 1975 California State Health Board's study states that more than 300,000 injuries a year are caused by litter. The injuries come mainly from broken beer and soda bottles and pull-tab openers from cans. These figures seem high, but many city and state governments are fighting back to clean up this problem.

Raymond Haydel.

The Price of Gold

When the price of gold reached the somewhat mystical and psychological barrier of over \$200 per ounce, it caused many people to examine the history of this remarkable yellow element. According to figures published in World Coin News (August 15, 1978), the Forty-Niners panned gold for \$16 an ounce. By 1933, the price of gold was fixed by law at \$20.67 per ounce, and in 1934, the Gold Reserve Act set the price at \$35 per ounce. This increase represents 118.7% in about eighty-five years. The \$3.5 price remained static until April, 1968, when gold backing for the United States dollar was removed and the price went to \$38 per ounce. Since then, the prices have climbed meteorically. On May 14, 1973, gold rose to \$100 per ounce or a 163% increase in five years. By April, 1974, gold had reached \$179.50 per ounce, but it slumped to \$129 by July 4 of that year. After rather erratic highs and lows for the next two years, gold plunged to \$107.75 an ounce on July 20, 1976. However, the market has steadily increased until the magical \$200 per ounce was reached when the London price was fixed at \$201.30 per ounce on July 28, 1978. Thus, since the Forty-Niners sold their gold for \$16 an ounce, the price has increased 1158% in about 130 years.

Beth Aarons

MISLEADING STATISTICS

Statistics can be misleading as well as informative. The following paragraph is an example.

Who Lives in San Antonio?

There are no Americans living in San Antonio, Texas. A 1971 survey by the Federal Bureau of Labor and Statistics revealed that 56.5% of San Antonio's population were Mexican-Americans. Another 10.3% were Afro-Americans, and 8.6% were Polish-Americans. German-Americans accounted for 7.9% of the population, while 4.2% were Chinese-Americans and 2.3% were Japanese-Americans. Various Scandinavian-Americans (Danes, Swedes) amounted to 4.1% of the people, and Slavic-Americans (Russians, Czechs, Bulgarians) made up the remaining 6.1% of the city's population. From these statistics, one may conclude that there are no Americans living in San Antonio.

Austin Bonner

PRACTICE EXERCISES

A. Write three topic sentences which indicate that the paragraph will be developed, at least in part, by the use of statistics.

B. Choose one of the sentences and support the controlling idea by using numerical data. Answer these questions for yourself: What main fact will the statistics prove (illustrate, support)? To what sources are these statistics attributable?