

10. Divide your Facebook friends into categories according to some logical principle. Include a thesis statement that indicates how different the various groups are.

Collaborative Activity for Classification and Division

Working in a group of four students, devise a classification system encompassing all the different kinds of popular music the members of your group favor. You may begin with general categories, such as country, pop, and rhythm and blues, but you should also include more specific categories, such as rap and heavy metal, in your classification system. After you decide on categories and subcategories that represent the tastes of all group members, fill in examples for each category. Then, devise several different options for arranging your categories into an essay.

Definition

What Is Definition?

A **definition** tells what a term means and how it differs from other terms in its class. In the following paragraph from “Altruistic Behavior,” anthropologist Desmond Morris defines *altruism*, the key term of his essay.

Topic sentence Altruism is the performance of an unselfish act. As a pattern of behavior, this act must have **Extended definition defines term by enumeration and negation** two properties: it must benefit someone else, and it must do so to the disadvantage of the benefactor. It is not merely a matter of being helpful; it is helpfulness at a cost to yourself.

Most people think of definition in terms of print or online dictionaries, which give brief, succinct explanations — called **formal definitions** — of what words mean. But definition also includes explaining what something, or even someone, *is* — that is, its essential nature. Sometimes a definition requires a paragraph, an essay, or even a whole book. These longer, more complex definitions are called **extended definitions**.

Understanding Formal Definitions

Look at any dictionary, and you will notice that all definitions have a standard three-part structure. First, they present the *term* to be defined, then the general *class* it is a part of, and finally the *qualities that differentiate it* from the other terms in the same class.

TERM	CLASS	DIFFERENTIATION
behaviorism	a theory	that regards the objective facts of a subject's actions as the only valid basis for psychological study
cell	a unit of protoplasm	with a nucleus, cytoplasm, and an enclosing membrane

naturalism	a literary movement	whose original adherents believed that writers should treat life with scientific objectivity
mitosis	a process	of nuclear division of cells, consisting of prophase, metaphase, anaphase, and telophase
authority	a power	to command and require obedience

Understanding Extended Definitions

Many extended-definition essays include short formal definitions like those in dictionaries. In such an essay, a brief formal definition can introduce readers to the extended definition, or it can help to support the essay's thesis. However, an extended definition does not follow a set **pattern of development**. Instead, it uses whatever strategies best suit the writer's purpose, the term being defined, and the writing situation. In fact, any one (or more than one) of the essay patterns illustrated in this book can be used to structure a definition essay.

Using Definition

Providing a formal definition of each term you use is usually not necessary or desirable. Readers will either know what a word means or be able to look it up. Sometimes, however, defining a term is essential. On an exam, for example, you might be asked to define *behaviorism*; tell what a *cell* is; explain the meaning of the literary term *naturalism*; include a comprehensive definition of *mitosis* in your answer; or define *authority*. Such exam questions cannot always be answered in a sentence or two. In fact, the definitions they call for often require a full paragraph — or even several paragraphs.

Extended definitions are useful in many academic assignments besides exams. For example, definitions can explain abstractions such as *freedom*, controversial terms such as *right to life*, or *slang* terms (informal expressions whose meanings may vary from locale to locale or change as time passes). In a particular writing situation, a definition may be essential because a term has more than one meaning, because you are using it in an unusual way, because you are fairly certain the term will be unfamiliar to your readers, or because it is central to your discussion.

Planning a Definition Essay

Developing a Thesis Statement

The thesis of a definition essay should do more than simply identify the term to be defined — and more than just define it. The thesis statement

the term. For example, assume you set out to write an extended definition of *behaviorism*. If your goal is to show its usefulness for treating patients with certain psychological disorders, a statement like “This essay will define behaviorism” will not be very helpful. Even a formal definition — “Behaviorism is a theory that regards the objective facts of a subject's actions as the only valid basis for psychological study” — is not enough. Your thesis needs to suggest the *value* of this kind of therapy, not just tell what it is — for example, “Contrary to critics' objections, behaviorism is a valid approach for treating a wide variety of psychological dysfunctions.”

Deciding on a Pattern of Development

You can organize a definition essay according to one or more of the patterns of development described in this book. As you plan your essay and jot down your ideas about the term or subject you will define, you will see which other patterns are most useful. For example, the formal definitions of the five terms discussed on page 490 could be expanded with five different patterns of development:

- **Exemplification** To explain *behaviorism*, you could give **examples**. Carefully chosen cases could show how this theory of psychology applies to different situations. These examples could help readers see exactly how behaviorism works and what it can and cannot account for. Often, examples are the clearest way to explain something. Defining dreams as “the symbolic representation of mental states” might convey little to readers who do not know much about psychology, but a few examples would help you make your meaning clear. Many students have dreams about taking exams — perhaps dreaming that they are late for the test, that they remember nothing about the course, or that they are writing their answers in disappearing ink. You might explain the nature of dreams by interpreting these particular dreams, which may reflect anxiety about a course or about school in general.

- **Description** You can explain the nature of something by **describing** it. For example, the concept of a *cell* is difficult to grasp from just a formal definition, but your readers would understand the concept more clearly if you were to describe what a cell looks like, possibly with the aid of a diagram or two. Concentrating on the cell membrane, cytoplasm, and nucleus, you could detail each structure's appearance and function. These descriptions would enable readers to visualize the whole cell and understand its workings. Of course, description involves more than the visual: a definition of a tsunami might describe the sounds and the appearance of this enormous ocean wave, and a definition of Parkinson's disease might include a description of how its symptoms affect a patient.

- **Comparison and contrast** An extended definition of *naturalism* could use a **comparison-and-contrast** structure. Naturalism is one of

be contrasted with those of other literary movements, such as romanticism or realism. Or, you might compare and contrast the plots and characters of several naturalistic works with those of romantic or realistic works. Anytime you need to define something unfamiliar, you can compare it to something familiar to your readers. For example, your readers may never have heard of the Chinese dish sweet-and-sour cabbage, but you can help them imagine it by saying it tastes something like cole slaw. You can also define a thing by contrasting it with something unlike it, especially if the two have some qualities in common. For instance, one way to explain the British sport of rugby is by contrasting it with American football, which is not as violent.

• **Process** Because mitosis is a process, an extended definition of *mitosis* should be organized as a **process explanation**. By tracing the process from stage to stage, you would clearly define this type of cell division for your readers. Process is also a suitable pattern for defining objects in terms of what they do. For example, because a computer carries out certain processes, an extended definition of a computer would probably include a process explanation.

• **Classification and division** You could define *authority* by using **classification and division**. Basing your extended definition on the model developed by the German sociologist Max Weber, you could divide the class *authority* into the subclasses *traditional authority*, *charismatic authority*, and *legal-bureaucratic authority*. By explaining each type of authority, you could clarify this very broad term for your readers. In both extended and formal definitions, classification and division can be very useful. By identifying the class something belongs to, you are explaining what kind of thing it is. For instance, *monetarism* is an economic theory; *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a novel; and *emphysema* is a disease. Likewise, by dividing a class into subclasses, you are defining something more specifically. Emphysema, for instance, is a disease of the lungs and can therefore be classified with tuberculosis but not with appendicitis.

Phrasing Your Definition

• Whatever form your definitions take, make certain that they clearly define your terms. Be sure to provide a true definition, not just a descriptive statement such as “Happiness is a four-day weekend.” Also, remember that repetition is not definition, so don’t include the term you are defining in your definition. For instance, the statement “Abstract art is a school of artists whose works are abstract” clarifies nothing for your readers. Finally, define as precisely as possible. Name the class of the term you are defining — “mitosis is a process of cell division” — and define this class as narrowly and as accurately as you can, clearly differentiating your term from other members of its class. Careful attention to the language and structure of

Structuring a Definition Essay

Like other essays, a definition essay should have an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. Although a formal definition strives for objectivity, an extended definition usually does not. Instead, it is likely to define a term in a way that reflects your attitude toward the subject or your reason for defining it. For example, your extended-definition paper about literary *naturalism* might argue that the significance of this movement’s major works has been underestimated by literary scholars. Similarly, your definition of *authority* might criticize its abuses. In such cases, the **thesis statement** provides a focus for your definition essay, showing readers your approach to the definition.

The **introduction** identifies the term to be defined, perhaps presents a brief formal definition, and goes on to state the essay’s thesis. The body of the essay expands the definition, using any one (or several) of the patterns of development explained and illustrated in this text.

In addition to using various patterns of development, you can expand the **body** of your definition by using any of the following strategies:

- You can define a term by using **synonyms** (words with similar meanings).
- You can define a term by using **negation** (telling what it is *not*).
- You can define a term by using **enumeration** (listing its characteristics).
- You can define a term by using an **analogy** (identifying similarities between an unfamiliar term and something likely to be more familiar to readers).
- You can define a term by discussing its **origin and development** (the word’s derivation, original meaning, and usages).

NOTE: If you are describing something that is unfamiliar to your readers, you can also include a **visual** — a drawing, painting, diagram, or photograph — to supplement your definition.

Your essay’s **conclusion** reminds readers why you have chosen to define the term, perhaps restating your thesis.

Suppose your assignment is to write a short paper for your introductory psychology course. You decide to examine *behaviorism*. Of course, you can define the word in one sentence, or possibly two. But to explain the *concept* of behaviorism and its status in the field of psychology, you must go beyond the dictionary.

Now, you have to decide what kinds of explanations are most suitable for your topic and for your intended audience. If you are trying to define *behaviorism* for readers who know very little about psychology, you might use analogies that relate behaviorism to your readers’ experiences, such as how they were raised or how they train their pets. You might also use examples,

treatment but to experiences in everyday life. If, however, you are directing your paper to your psychology instructor, who obviously already knows what behaviorism is, your purpose is to show that you know, too. One way to do this is to compare behaviorism with other psychological theories; another way is to give examples of how behaviorism works in practice; still another is to briefly summarize the background and history of the theory. (In a long paper, you might use all of these strategies.)

After considering your paper's scope and audience, you might decide that because behaviorism is somewhat controversial, your best strategy is to supplement a formal definition with examples showing how behaviorist assumptions and methods are applied in specific situations. These examples, drawn from your class notes and textbook, would support your thesis that behaviorism is a valid approach for treating certain psychological dysfunctions. Together, your examples would define *behaviorism* as it is understood today.

An informal outline for your essay might look like this:

SAMPLE OUTLINE: Definition

- Introduction:** Thesis statement — Contrary to its critics' objections, behaviorism is a valid approach for treating a wide variety of psychological dysfunctions.
- Background:** Definition of behaviorism, including its origins and evolution
- First example:** The use of behaviorism to help psychotics function in an institutional setting
- Second example:** The use of behaviorism to treat neurotic behavior, such as chronic anxiety, a phobia, or a pattern of destructive acts
- Third example:** The use of behaviorism to treat normal but antisocial or undesirable behavior, such as heavy smoking or overeating
- Conclusion:** Restatement of thesis or review of key points

Notice how the three examples in this paper define behaviorism with the kind of complexity, detail, and breadth that a formal definition could not duplicate. This definition is more like a textbook explanation — and, in fact, textbook explanations are often written as extended definitions.

Revising a Definition Essay

When you revise a definition essay, consider the items on the revision checklist on page 68. In addition, pay special attention to the items on the following checklist, which apply specifically to revising definition essays.

REVISION CHECKLIST Definition

- Does your assignment call for definition?
- Does your essay include a clearly stated thesis that identifies the term you will define and tells readers why you are defining it?
- Have you included a formal definition of your subject? Have you defined other key terms that may not be familiar to your readers?
- Have you used appropriate patterns of development to expand your definition?
- Do you need to use other strategies — such as synonyms, negation, enumeration, or analogies — to expand your definition?
- Do you need to discuss the origin and development of the term you are defining?
- Do you need to include a visual?

Editing a Definition Essay

When you edit your definition essay, follow the guidelines on the editing checklists on pages 85, 88, and 90. In addition, focus on the grammar, mechanics, and punctuation issues that are particularly relevant to definition essays. One of these issues — avoiding the phrases *is when* and *is where* in formal definitions — is discussed below.

GRAMMAR IN CONTEXT Avoiding *is when* and *is where*

Many extended definitions include a one-sentence formal definition. As you have learned, such definitions must include the term you are defining, the class to which the term belongs, and the characteristics that distinguish the term from other terms in the same class.

Sometimes, however, when you are defining a term or concept, you may find yourself departing from this set structure and using the phrase *is when* or *is where*. If so, your definition is not complete because it omits the term's class. (In fact, the use of *is when* or *is where* indicates that you are actually presenting an example of the term and not a definition.)

You can avoid this error by making certain that the form of the verb *be* in your definition is always followed by a noun.

INCORRECT: As described in the essay "The Untouchable," *prejudice* is when someone forms an irrational bias or negative opinion of a person or group (Mahrab 496).

CORRECT: As described in the essay "The Untouchable," *prejudice* is an irrational bias or negative opinion of a person or group (Mahrab 496).

INCORRECT: According to Meghan Daum, *celebrity* is where you don't buy your own groceries (511).

CORRECT: According to Meghan Daum, *celebrities* are people who "don't buy their own groceries" (511).